

Gospel Ferment in Malawi: Theological Essays



Kenneth R. Ross



Luviri Reprints no. 6

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Gospel Ferment in Malawi: Theological Essays

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Mzuzu

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Many books have been published on or in Malawi that are no longer available. While some of these books simply have run their course, others are still of interest for scholars and the general public. Some of the classics have been reprinted outside Malawi over the decades, and during the last two decades, first the Kachere Series and then other publishers have achieved "never out of stock status" by joining the African Books Collective's Print on Demand approach, but there are still a good number of books that would be of interest but are no longer in print.

The Luviri Reprint Series has taken up the task to make those books on or from Malawi, which are out of print but not out of interest, available again, through Print on Demand and therefore worldwide.

While the Luviri Reprint Series concentrates on Malawi, it is also interested in the neighbouring countries and even in those further afield.

Luviri Reprints publish the books as they originally were. Usually a new Foreword is added, and where appropriate, new information has been added. All such additions, mostly in footnotes, are marked by an asterisk (*).

The Editors

Foreword

I look back on the early 1990s in Malawi as one of the most stimulating and formative periods in my life. I had arrived in Zomba in 1988, fresh from completing my Ph.D. at Edinburgh University and appointed as a Lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Malawi's Chancellor College. Very quickly my imagination was gripped by the country and its people. In particular, I was fascinated by the vitality of the church life to which I was introduced as a minister within the Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian.

I was fortunate to be a member of a University Department that was absorbed by its teaching and research responsibilities, rich in collegiality and boundless in ambition. From the first moment I stepped into the classroom I was bowled over by the quality of the students I encountered, several of whom remain close friends to this day. My particular responsibility was the introduction of a Theology degree programme, the first in Malawi's history. No sooner was it established than a dynamic programme of postgraduate studies was developed, gathering an outstanding cohort of part-time M.A. and Ph.D. students. The Department was also remarkably active in publication, founding the Kachere Series, which would immeasurably enrich Malawian literature during the following years.

Meanwhile Malawi itself was going through years of dramatic change. After thirty years of a one-party dictatorship and police state, the end of the Cold War and of apartheid in South Africa heralded a time of political transition for Malawi. The multi-party era began in 1992-93, with a Pastoral Letter from the Roman Catholic Bishops proving to be the trigger of far-reaching social and political change. Soon Malawi would have multi-party elections and a democratic constitution. The sense of new-found freedom and hopefulness was palpable. At the same time, this was the period in which HIV and AIDS began to cast its deadly shadow over Malawi, with friends and colleagues being cut off in their prime and society being shaken to the core.

It was in this creative, buoyant and challenging environment that my own theological formation was taking place. My twin reference points, on a daily basis, were the unfolding drama of Malawi's political transformation and the deep experience of faith in which I shared both in the University context and in the rural congregation of Nkanda, near Zomba, where I was serving as pastor. I felt I was caught up in a "ferment" that was, at one and

the same time, the profound inculturation of Christian faith in the African context and a transforming movement within Malawian society. These two were closely intertwined and I discovered a theological calling in the attempt to understand and interpret what was taking place around me.

The result was this book: a collection of essays that I wrote during the early 1990s. Some are an attempt to think theologically about the social and political changes and challenges that Malawi was navigating during these years. Others are critically reflecting on the nature and content of the Christian faith as it was coming to expression in an African context. What was occurring was the culmination of a 100-year process that had begun, so far as much of southern Malawi is concerned, with the work of the Blantyre Mission of the Church of Scotland in the late 19th century. Seeking to understand what was occurring at the end of this 100-year process sent me back to its beginning. So a couple of the essays are historical, examining in particular the contribution of David Clement Scott who led the Blantyre Mission from 1881 to 1898. Deeply immersed in Malawian life, language and culture, Scott was an early exponent of inculturation as the way forward for Christianity in Africa. For me, he was a prophetic figure whose sensitivity to the dynamics of faith and culture in the Malawian context remained highly relevant to the situation prevailing a hundred years later.

This book can be no more than a snapshot of how one young theologian was thinking during the years 1990-94, in some ways pivotal years in Malawi's modern history. I am grateful that it can remain available through the Luviri Reprints and hope that it may provide some useful perspectives and stimulus to others who seek to make a theological contribution at times of "ferment", both in Malawi and elsewhere.

Kenneth R. Ross

Netherlorn, Argyll

May 2018

Foreword

It is indeed a delightful privilege to have been asked by the author to write a foreword to this important publication. What is given to us here is a collection of essays which have been written over a number of years. They are now being presented to the wider community. Although the book arises out of the Malawi context, the issues it raises are of concern to the whole of Africa. The book, therefore, serves as a model of theological reflection on pertinent issues by reflecting on aspects of the history of the Church in Malawi, the current situation, and what it offers for the future.

The essays are based on the author's research and his active participation in the life of the Church in Malawi. As we all know, until recently Malawi has been ruled by Dr Kamuzu Banda who established himself as a dictator who tolerated no opposition since the attainment of independence. Malawi's situation is not unique in Africa. The one-party state system has created life presidencies which, in order to maintain themselves in power, have used repressive measures to govern their people. For many of our African countries the struggle for liberation only entered a new phase with the demise of colonial powers. Many of our African regimes that took over from the colonial governments tended to be even more oppressive than their colonial masters. Corruption, tribalism, nepotism, and many other social evils continue to be universal African concerns.

In Malawi the Church has played a significant role in inspiring a revolution that resulted in the establishment of a democratic system. Over the years the Church suffered with the people as it was severely restricted in terms of its public witness on political issues. It could not carry out its prophetic ministry. The Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter unleashed a great deal of courage among Christians to be indeed advocates of social justice and participatory democracy.

The author of this book has been very active as a pastor, theologian, educator, and member of one of the mainstream Christian churches in Malawi. The essays presented in the book are a plea for relevancy and contextuality in Christian praxis and theological reflection in Malawi and, indeed, in Africa as a whole. There is a profound concern for the

translation of the Gospel of Christ in Malawi in such a manner that it empowers the people to transform their society by living out the message of the Kingdom of God. There is reflected in these essays a concern for the social witness of the Church in Africa and its role in development. What is the place of Christian missions in Africa today? How can Christian missions in Africa be effective agents of social, economic, and political change? What contribution can the Christian churches make towards social justice and participatory democracy?

The case of Malawi clearly shows that the Church in Africa may be the only sign of hope in the midst of all the suffering, extreme violations of human rights, and genocides. I therefore heartily commend the book to every person interested in the role of the church in society and its potential for contributing towards social, political, and economic change in Africa.

Dr Ambrose Moyo, University of Zimbabwe
Secretary, Conference of African Theological Institutions

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Preface

It is well known that Malawi has proved to be hospitable territory for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A majority of the population now profess to be Christians. But what effect is the Gospel having today in Malawian religion, culture and society? That is the question being addressed in this collection of essays. Some of the studies are more historical, others more contemporary. Some are based on primary research, others more on theological reflection. Some are ecumenical in scope, others more concentrated on the Presbyterian tradition which has been particularly influential in Malawi. What unites all the essays is the attempt to offer theological analysis of some significant developments which have occurred in Malawian religion and society. I hope this may assist students of the Malawi situation to better understand where the church has come from, where it is now, and what are some of the challenges of the immediate future. At a time when the church is playing a significant role in the rapid social change in Malawi, these essays may provide some useful clues for those seeking to interpret the unfolding history.

Versions of chapters 1 and 8 have appeared in the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*; of chapters 4 and 7 in the *Africa Theological Journal*; and of chapter 6 in *Missionalia*. A version of chapter 2 was published in pamphlet form by St Andrew Press, Edinburgh, and different versions of chapter 5 appeared in the *Sources for the Study of Religion in Malawi* produced by the Department of Theology and Religious Studies in the University of Malawi and in the *Journal of Religion in Africa*. I am grateful to the editors of the above publications who gave permission for the material to be revised and edited so as to compile the present volume. Most of the chapters have their origin as papers presented at various conferences and seminars in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Malawi between 1990 and 1994. I am therefore greatly indebted to colleagues and students who participated in these discussions and contributed to the formation of the material which is presented here. Gladly and affectionately I dedicate the book to them.

Kenneth R. Ross, Zomba, November 1994.

1. The Truth Shall Set You Free: Christian Social Witness in Malawi 1992–93

Introduction: The Wind of Change in Malawi

On 16 June 1993 the Malawi state radio announced the result of the national referendum held two days earlier: 63% had voted to end the one-party system and adopt a multi-party system of government. This, in face of most determined attempts by the ruling Malawi Congress Party to secure the opposite result, was greeted as a great and revolutionary victory for the people. Jubilant crowds gathered in the towns and cities to celebrate. In some cases these crowds marched first to the Bishop's House – their immediate acknowledgment that they owed their new-found freedom to the Catholic Bishops who had been the first to openly challenge the one-party system. The crowds were recalling the Pastoral Letter issued by the Catholic Bishops at Lent 1992, a document of such importance that, in common parlance, modern Malawian history is divided between "before the Pastoral Letter" and "since the Pastoral Letter"! The manifesto of the United Democratic Front, the first to be issued by an opposition party after the referendum victory, began with a quotation from the Pastoral Letter and stated that the movement for political reform had occurred in response to the call from the Catholic Bishops.¹ The UDF leader Bakili Muluzi, in his victory speech after the referendum, had already thanked the churches for the role they played in the democratization process: "In particular, I would like to single out the seven Catholic Bishops and the [Presbyterian] Blantyre Synod."² There can be no mistaking the fact that Christian witness has been of some significance in the social and political transformation currently occurring in Malawi. This has been a matter of surprise to many since the churches were widely thought to have been in thrall to the one-party regime. The purpose of this chapter is to give some account and to offer some analysis of Christian social witness in Malawi from the issue of the Pastoral Letter in March 1992 to the national referendum of June 1993.

¹ *Towards a Better Malawi: United Democratic Front Manifesto*, July 1993, p. 3.

The Historical Background

In order to appreciate the revolutionary nature of the referendum result, it is necessary to understand the preceding political history. Since achieving independence from British rule in 1964 the national life of Malawi had been marked by the extent of the political control exercised by the ruling Malawi Congress Party under the leadership of "Life" President Hastings Kamuzu Banda. It has been a one-party state in which it was unconstitutional and illegal to form any other political party. In practice, to avoid harassment it was necessary to become a member of the Party. People, as well as any businesses which expected to be allowed to prosper, were frequently forced to give donations to the government or the Party (the distinction between the two having been obscured). Public discourse was shaped by party propaganda and the mark of political correctness was unquestioning personal loyalty to the Life President. "Dissidents" or "confusionists" who questioned any sensitive features of the status quo were subject to detention without trial and often suffered for many years in the harsh Malawi prison regime. The public media were government controlled and were unashamedly used for propaganda purposes. No alternative view was tolerated in public or even in private. The legal system, while technically independent, was effectively brought under government control. The churches, while free of state control over their internal affairs, were required to give the regime their stamp of legitimacy and to restrict their witness to personal spirituality and morality.

This tightly controlled system has brought great wealth to a small minority who have been able to benefit from it. Dr Banda himself has amassed great personal wealth and has lavished patronage on the small elite which makes no secret of the fact that they owe to him everything they have. At independence Malawi had a small domestic market, the legacy of colonial neglect, very low productivity in agriculture and a tradition of exporting vast amounts of its labour to the industrial economies of South Africa and Rhodesia. In the years since independence the economy has expanded greatly, helped by a large inflow of foreign capital. Yet the majority of the population has derived little or no benefit from this economic growth. Dr Banda

shrewdly maintained the structures of colonial oppression and exploitation but turned them to his own advantage. His agricultural policy, e.g., has systematically benefitted the estate sector at the expense of the smallholders. The ordinary people of the villages, dependent on subsistence agriculture, find themselves living in conditions of desperate and deepening poverty.³ In 1989 the World Bank reported that Malawi was one of the six poorest countries in the world, with a per capita Gross National product of \$160, an infant mortality rate of 153 per 1,000 live births, a life expectancy of 46 years, and a literacy rate of only 25%.⁴ However, to mention these problems was regarded as tantamount to treason and the myth of Malawi as an African success story was vigorously promoted by the Banda regime.

In order to understand the nature of the Christian witness in this situation, some knowledge of the ecclesiastical history is required. The two major churches in Malawi are the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, each of which claims the adherence of around one quarter of the population. (There is also a significant Muslim minority and many smaller Christian churches). Both Catholics and Presbyterians were publicly silent on social issues throughout the 1964–91 period. While in theory they could use their access to the government to raise issues of concern in private, this has not on the whole been an effective form of witness. The two churches have very different histories as regards their social witness, though ironically both led to the silence of the post-independence years. The Presbyterian missions began their work in 1875 and so were already well-established when the British Protectorate was declared in 1891. While the missionaries welcomed British protection from Arab and Portuguese interference, they were fiercely critical of government policy on such matters as land, labour and taxation.⁵ Meanwhile the success of the missions in education led to the emergence of a class of educated Africans whose expectations could not be met within the framework of colonial rule. When John Chilembwe, an American

³ See, e.g., *Malawi: A Moment of Truth*, (London: CIIR, 1993), pp. 15–18.

⁴ See "Human Rights in Malawi: Report of a Joint Delegation of the Scottish Faculty of Advocates, the Law Society of England and Wales and the General Council of Bar to Malawi", 17–27 September 1992, p. 7.

⁵ See A.C. Ross, "The Origins and Development of the Church of Scotland Mission, Blantyre, Nyasaland 1875–1926", (Ph.D., University of Edinburgh, 1968).

trained Providence Industrial Mission Pastor, led an armed rebellion against British rule in 1915 his supporters included many "graduates" of the Presbyterian mission at Blantyre.⁶ At the same time the graduates of the Livingstonia Mission in the north of the country began forming the "Native Associations" which were the precursors of the Congress movement which eventually achieved independence in the 1960s.⁷ The nationalist movement remained predominantly Presbyterian to the extent that of the 1,500 hard-core Congressmen placed in detention camps during the Emergency of 1959, it is estimated that over 1,200 were Presbyterian elders and laymen.⁸ The Presbyterian Synods of Blantyre and Livingstonia were deeply involved in opposition to the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, a racist political union which was forced on Malawi by the British government and was totally rejected by the entire African population.

The result was that the Malawi Congress Party, which finally succeeded in its struggle and came to power, was predominantly Presbyterian. Of the 10 ministers appointed to the first Cabinet, no less than 8 were products of the Presbyterian missions.⁹ The Presbyterian Church was inevitably very close to the government – perhaps too close! The effect which this had in silencing the social witness of the church was acknowledged in a statement issued by the Blantyre Synod in January 1993:

If we look at our own history as the CCAP during the time of the struggle for Independence, we will see that Blantyre Synod was very much in support of the Nyasaland African Congress (later called the MCP). Because of this very verbal stance on the side of the MCP, after Independence, the CCAP was aligned closely with the government and become so assimilated with the government's activities that the Synod was often invited to pray and participate as a Church at various government functions. However, because of this assimilation and alignment with the MCP, the Church gradually lost its ability to admonish or speak pastorally to the government. We do not want to make

⁶ See G. Shepperson & T. Price, *Independent African*, (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1958), pp. 363–80.

⁷ See J. McCracken, *Politics and Christianity in Malawi 1875–1940*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 257–73.

⁸ See K.N. Mufuka, *Missions and Politics in Malawi*, (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1977), p. 201.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 202–3.

the same mistake at this time in order to ensure that the Church retains its prophetic voice throughout the coming years of our country's history.¹⁰

Given that church leaders also had to reckon with a political climate in which dissent was likely to attract swift retribution, it is not difficult to see how the Presbyterian tradition of prophetic social criticism came to be submerged. Until the events of 1992–93 proved otherwise, it seemed to have almost entirely disappeared.

The Roman Catholic missionaries were later to arrive in Malawi, beginning their work in 1901. They also adopted a different strategy. In contrast to the Presbyterian attempt to transform society through high-level education, the Catholic missionaries concentrated their efforts on establishing the church within the existing structures of village life.¹¹ In the aftermath of the Chilembwe rising, when the Presbyterian missions were regarded with intense suspicion by the colonial government and the settler community, the Catholic missionaries gained new prestige as staunch upholders of the status quo.¹² This offered short-term advantage but in the 1940s and 1950s, when the nationalists began to dominate Malawian politics, it meant that Catholics appeared to be identified with the wrong side. This damaging identification was confirmed in 1960–61 when the Catholic hierarchy backed the Christian Democratic party at a time when the nationalist movement, now organised as the Malawi Congress Party, was the embodiment of the people's aspirations for independence.¹³ The result was that the Catholic Church had very little political capital when the Malawi Congress Party formed the first government of independent Malawi in 1964. This explains the low profile taken by the Catholics at national level in the early years of independence. Given the climate of intolerance, any Catholic initiative on the national scene would certainly have been counter-productive. In any case, the Catholics were geared to the parish level. Evangelization was now proving highly successful and the Catholic leaders were preoccupied

¹⁰ "A Statement on the Role of the Church in the Transformation of Malawi in the Context of Justice and Peace", Produced by the Administrators Conference, Blantyre Synod CCAP, 22–23 January 1993, p. 4.

¹¹ See I. Linden, *Catholics, Peasants and Chewa Resistance in Nyasaland 1889–1939*, (London: Heinemann, 1974), pp. 46–91.

¹² See *ibid.*, pp. 87–102.

¹³ See P. Short, *Banda*, (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 141.

with the opportunities and problems presented by rapid church growth. Over the years, co-operation in the fields of education and health brought the Catholic Church into a working relationship with the government and its leaders were accorded a place of honour, provided they restricted their ministry to "spiritual" matters and welfare work, leaving social and political matters to the Party. The visit of the Pope to Malawi in 1989 which was treated very much as a state occasion, seemed to set the seal on the political rehabilitation of the Catholic Church. It had developed into a nation-wide organisation of formidable strength yet, so far as social witness was concerned, remained a sleeping giant.

The Lenten Pastoral Letter 1992

Against this background it is understandable that the Malawi Congress Party should have reacted with shock and outrage when the Catholic Bishops broke their 30-year silence on social issues with a forthright critique of the Malawi system. Rarely in modern times can any church document have had such an immediately explosive effect in the life of the nation. Within four days the ruling Party was convened in emergency session to condemn the Bishops, possession of the Pastoral Letter was declared to be an act of sedition, and for a time there were fears for the lives of the Bishops.¹⁴ At the same time popular excitement spread, the sense of liberation was palpable, and there emerged a consensus that Malawi could now never be the same again. The Letter began with some words of Pope Paul IV: "The Church is certainly not willing to restrict her action only to the religious field and disassociate herself from man's temporal problems."¹⁵ On that basis the Bishops forced open issues which had not been publicly discussed before. On the growing gap between the rich and the poor, for example, the Bishops observed: "Many people still live in circumstances which are hardly compatible with their dignity as sons and daughters of God. Their life is a struggle for survival. At the same time a minority enjoys the fruits of development and can afford to live in luxury and wealth."¹⁶ Education and health were given

¹⁴ See *Malawi News*, 14–20 March 1992, especially the editorial entitled "No Mercy"

¹⁵ "Living our Faith: Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops of Malawi to be Read in every Catholic Church on 8th March 1992", p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

extensive attention and, while the achievements of the government were recognised, major problems were exposed. Shortcomings in the national educational system were noted: widespread illiteracy, falling standards, overcrowding, shortage of teachers and materials, unequal access to education, and indiscipline. Regarding the health service, concern was expressed about shortage of health centres, overcrowding and lack of personnel, the poor quality of medical care, and inequality in medical treatment.¹⁷

The most powerful part of the Letter is found, however, in a section entitled "Participation of all in public life" The Bishops drew on both biblical texts (Ephesians 4:7–16 and I Peter 4:10–11) and traditional African proverbs to argue that society can be strong only when it enjoys the active participation of all its members. What this meant for Malawi was expounded as follows:

Human persons are honoured – and this honour is due to them – whenever they are allowed to search freely for the truth, to voice their opinions and be heard, to engage in creative service of the community in all liberty within associations of their own choice. Nobody should ever have to suffer reprisals for honestly expressing and living up to their convictions: intellectual, religious or political. We can only regret that this is not always the case in our country.... Academic freedom is seriously restricted; exposing injustices can be considered a betrayal; revealing some evils of our society is seen as slandering the country; monopoly of mass media and censorship prevent the expression of dissenting views; some people have paid dearly for their political opinions; access to public places like markets, hospitals, bus depots etc is frequently denied to those who cannot produce a party card; forced donations have become a way of life.¹⁸

The Bishops went on to sketch the effects of all this on national life and consciousness, the dark tragedy which has overtaken Malawi in the years since independence: "It creates an atmosphere of resentment among citizens. It breeds a climate of mistrust and fear. This fear of harassment and mutual suspicion generates a society in which the talents of many lie unused and in which there is little room for initiative."¹⁹ First steps towards the restoration of a climate of trust and

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

openness were proposed (steps which were taken to a remarkable extent in the process leading up to the national referendum): the establishment of an independent press, open forums of discussion, free association of citizens for social and political purposes, government accountability, the establishment of independent, accessible and impartial courts of justice.²⁰ Finally, the Letter made what perhaps proved to be its most telling point: "People will not be scandalized to hear these things; they know them. They will only be grateful that their true needs are recognised and that efforts are made to answer them. Feeding them with slogans and half-truths – or untruths – only increases their cynicism and their mistrust of government representatives."²¹ Much of the power of the Pastoral Letter lay in the fact that it simply voiced what everyone knew but no one had ever dared to say. It thus broke the culture of deceit which had been allowed to develop in Malawi. The effect was dramatic. It was with tears that many people read the photocopies of the Pastoral Letter which spread through the country like wildfire. Practically overnight the mode of discourse being used in everyday conversation was changed. People discovered that, as promised in the Pastoral Letter, "the truth will set you free."²²

To many Malawians, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, the Pastoral Letter is simply the Word of God which has liberated the people. Without wishing to gainsay that conviction we may also inquire as to what factors were responsible for the Bishops' decision to speak as they did.

1. Clearly the end of the Cold War and wave of democratization which swept through Europe and Africa from 1989 formed part of the background to the Bishops' initiative. In particular as the Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Mzuzu, Mgr. John Roche, indicated, they had noted "what had happened in Zambia, the way in which Kenneth Kaunda had listened to the people and stepped down"²³

2. Of greater significance, however, were the changes which have

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²² *Ibid.*, p.9.

²³ Mgr. John Roche, Apostolic Administrator of the Catholic Diocese of Mzuzu, Press Conference, London, 12 May 1992. Mgr. Roche was expelled from Malawi on 17 April 1992 for his part in the composition of the Pastoral Letter

occurred in Roman Catholic social teaching since *Gaudium Et Spes* (1965) and the Medellin Conference of 1968. The Catholic Church worldwide has demonstrated an increased appreciation that the Gospel demands solidarity with the poor and the disadvantaged. This has cultivated a readiness to speak out against exploitation and oppression and promoted "a growing awareness amongst the Christian community in Malawi that human rights are part of the Gospel."²⁴ The Malawian Bishops were also impressed by the courageous prophetic witness of Episcopal Conferences in other African Countries such as Kenya and Zimbabwe. Finally, during the Pope's visit in 1989, "he did not say anything in public concerning human rights but did so to the Bishops and stated that it was an integral part of the Gospel especially where there was lack of such rights."²⁵ The Pastoral Letter can only be properly understood in the context of the awakening of Catholic social teaching over the last twenty-five years.

3. It would be mistaken, however, to attribute too much to developments external to Malawi. When questioned about the origins of the Letter, one of the Bishops replied: "I did not write the Letter; it was written a long time ago on the hearts of our people."²⁶ Much of the Letter must be read as an echo of what Malawian Catholics have been saying to their priests over the years. This undoubtedly helps to account for the extraordinary width of support which the Letter immediately provoked.

4. The Bishops' own account of the issue of the Letter stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing consensus within the Episcopal Conference as to what required to be said and unanimity that this was God's time to speak. Some observers have regretted the fact that the Catholic Bishops acted alone without any ecumenical consultation. Certainly church unity is important at such a time, as was evident in the aftermath of the Pastoral, but there should be no underestimating the importance of the internal dynamics of the Episcopal Conference in the composition and issue of the Letter. The mutual trust and common engagement with the issues developed over the years were indispensable, in the Malawian context, to the production of a genuinely prophetic statement.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Unattributable interview.

Support for the Pastoral Letter was demonstrated in different forms. The following week students of the University of Malawi marched in support of the Bishops, an action which resulted in the closure of the main University campus for the first time in its history. A month later, on 6 April, Chakufwa Chihana, the Malawian secretary-general of the Southern African Trade Union Coordinating Council, returned to Malawi to begin a campaign for democratic change. In the speech which he attempted to make, before being arrested on the airport tarmac, Chihana appealed to the Pastoral Letter as an indication of the need for political reform.²⁷ He was later convicted of sedition and sentenced to 2 years imprisonment with hard labour. Throughout his imprisonment (reduced on appeal to nine months) he remained chairman of the opposition Alliance for Democracy and a symbol of the need for basic freedoms to be established in Malawi. Later in April an unprecedented wave of strikes swept both the private and public sectors, forcing the government to implement massive wage rises. The strikes were accompanied by rioting and looting directed particularly at properties identified with the Malawi Congress Party. It was unclear for some weeks, however, how the initiative of the Pastoral Letter could be taken up in a positive and constructive way. The Bishops themselves found it advisable to take a low profile for a time. It fell to the Presbyterians to begin to chart a way forward.

A Presbyterian Initiative: the Public Affairs Committee

In early June 1992 a delegation from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches visited Malawi. Together with representative leaders of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) they presented an open letter to the Life President entitled: "The Nation of Malawi in Crisis: the Church's Concern." They made direct reference to the Catholic Pastoral Letter, still technically a seditious document, and insisted that government must address the issues it raised.²⁸ At this stage, however, what was required was more than a Presbyterian echo of the Catholic social critique. Practical proposals were needed. The church leaders accordingly called for the appointment of a broadly based Commission with the mandate, "to make specific proposals for struc-

²⁷ *Independent* (British Newspaper), 8 April 1992.

²⁸ "The Nation of Malawi in Crisis: the Church's Concern", Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 2 June 1992, p.2.

tural reform towards a political system with sufficient checks and balances on the use of power, and guarantees of accountability at all levels of government; to review the judicial system in line with the rule of law; to look into the distribution of income and wealth required by the demands of social justice."²⁹ Meanwhile the letter called for immediate steps to be taken to remove injustices: "end the practice of detention without trial; release or bring to early and fair trial all political detainees; reform conditions of imprisonment in accordance with human dignity; allow freedom of expression and association, so as to encourage open discussion of the nation's future."³⁰ These demands were powerfully reinforced by the decision in May of the Western Donor community to suspend all development aid to Malawi until there was evidence of greater respect for human rights and "good governance" A process of reform was immediately undertaken by the government. Many political detainees were released. The International Committee of the Red Cross was invited to inspect the prisons. The practice of forced donations and the harassment of people who did not possess party cards was stopped. Painfully slowly, and with many obstructions along the way, the door began to be opened to freedom of expression and freedom of association. However, it was apparent that the government was hoping to placate its critics with relatively superficial reforms while maintaining the structures of repression. Though the President had given a favourable reply to the Presbyterian open letter and had invited the church leaders to meet with his ministers, the government stalled and was clearly reluctant to accede to the formation of a forum where fundamental political issues would be addressed.

Meanwhile, however, Presbyterian leaders were actively working to form a representative Commission. When they wrote again to the Life President their letter was signed by representatives not only of the Presbyterian Church but also the (Roman Catholic) Episcopal Conference of Malawi, the Anglican Church of Malawi, the Muslim community in Malawi, the Malawi Law Society, and the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry in Malawi.³¹ They reiterated their call for a Commission to be formed. This time the government

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Memorandum to His Excellency the Life President Ngwazi Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda, from the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian General Synod, 28 August 1992.

bowed to pressure and recognised the "Public Affairs Committee" (PAC), the first time a non-party organisation had been acknowledged as having a part to play in national political affairs. The government formed its own "Presidential Commission on Dialogue" and the two bodies met for the first time on 19 October 1992.³² The Presbyterian Church thus seemed to have achieved something of a diplomatic coup and to have made an important breakthrough in the drive for political reform. At the same time it became evident that the crisis had revealed deep divisions among the Presbyterians. The CCAP in Malawi is a union of three Synods, each of which has its own history and retains a large degree of independence. The Blantyre Synod in the south of the country has its origins in a Mission of the Established Church of Scotland which was founded in 1875. In the same year the Livingstonia Mission of the Free Church of Scotland was founded to work in the north of the country. Finally, in 1889, a Mission of the Dutch Reformed Church of Cape Province, South Africa, was established in the Central Region, eventually making its headquarters at Nkhoma. Though the three Missions worked together and joined forces to form the CCAP in 1924, each retained its own character and ethos. Tensions between them remained even after the missionaries handed over to local African leadership around 1960.³³ Now, in the crisis of 1992, these tensions rose to the surface in a new form.

The Scottish-originated Synods of Blantyre and Livingstonia agreed that the Pastoral Letter was an initiative which had to be followed through, indeed that God had granted a *kairos* to the people of Malawi. But they differed greatly in approach. The southern Synod, historically close to the Blantyre-based government, took a conciliatory approach based on the hope that genuine reform could be achieved through negotiations between the government and the emerging opposition. It was the Blantyre Synod which was largely responsible for the process which led to the formation of the PAC. Livingstonia Synod, from the disaffected north where the people believe that the MCP government has discriminated against them, took a much more confrontational approach. When the Synod met in late August its resolutions made it clear that it planned an active and aggressive

³² *Daily Times*, 21 October 1992.

³³ See J. Weller & J. Linden, *Mainstream Christianity to 1980 in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe*, (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), pp. 39–47, 112–127.

involvement in political life: "It is the responsibility of the Church to speak about violations of Human Rights, good governance and the protection of the voiceless. Church members must identify themselves with the oppressed, and participate in the affairs of the community by advocating people's rights through the distribution of literature and promotion of political education."³⁴ It was no surprise to learn that, when the Alliance for Democracy (Aford) went public in October, it enjoyed the active support of leaders and church members of Livingstonia Synod. Meanwhile, Blantyre Synod sought to be more circumspect in the attempt to occupy a mediating position in the political battle which was now hotting up.

These differences were minor, however, in comparison to the gap which opened between Blantyre and Livingstonia on the one hand, and the DRC-originated Nkhoma Synod on the other. This Synod, in contrast to the others, had kept out of the political arena during the establishment of colonial rule and the consequent nationalist struggle. The DRC missionaries appear not to have promoted political awareness in the way their Scottish counterparts did. So the Nkhoma Synod had little history of social critique and political engagement to guide it as it was engulfed by the new crisis. A further handicap is that the Central Region is the political power base of President Banda and the inner circle of the MCP who have personal historical links with Nkhoma Synod. It was always going to be more difficult and more costly for Nkhoma to distance itself in any way from the government than it was for the other churches. Therefore it was no great surprise when Nkhoma Synod kept out of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches initiative which led eventually to the formation of the PAC. A breakthrough seemed to come when Nkhoma Synod representatives on the Christian Council of Malawi signed an open letter which the Council sent to the government on 26 August 1992.³⁵ This letter was sharply critical of the government on issues of human rights and governance and called for a national referendum on the question of Malawi's form of government. It carried the force of being signed by representatives of all the major Protestant church bodies in the country, including Nkhoma Synod. Controversy ensued, however, when

³⁴ Memorandum from the Convener of Church and Politics, Livingstonia Synod, to Church of Scotland, 25 August 1992.

³⁵ Open Letter to the Government of Malawi, from the Christian Council of Malawi, 26 August 1992.

Rev. J.G.M. Maseko of Nkhoma wrote a letter to the MCP headquarters saying that he was forced to sign the critical letter to the government and asking to be pardoned. The Christian Council responded by voting to suspend Nkhoma Synod from membership of the Council.³⁶

The government-controlled press made much of this disunity and it was clear that the church had become a "site of struggle" within the Malawian national crisis. As the government struggled to retain an air of legitimacy it turned to the ministers of Nkhoma Synod to officiate at government functions and to generally show solidarity with the MCP. This they were willing to do and were rewarded accordingly with government patronage. The other churches felt betrayed that Nkhoma Synod was lining up against them in the struggle for justice and truth in Malawi. The rift widened and it became apparent that unity would not easily be restored. Belatedly, the Nkhoma Synod did seek to draw back from its unqualified support for the MCP government with a statement in April 1993 that: "the Synod believes that genuine Christians can support either side of the referendum question without violating the genuine ideals and principles of Christianity."³⁷ This attempt at "neutrality" did not convince the other churches who saw it simply as an evasion of the demands of the gospel. It did, however, leave the government even more bereft of the church endorsement on which it had depended in the past.

Meanwhile in late 1992 the pressure for political reform continued to intensify. The PAC planned to press for a national referendum (on the question of one party or multi-party system of government) when they met the Presidential Commission on Dialogue for the first time on 19 October. In order to forestall this initiative the President himself, on 18 October, announced the government's intention to hold such a referendum.³⁸ A new phase in Malawian political life was opened. With the announcement of the referendum a second "pressure group", the United Democratic Front, entered the arena. Paradoxically, however, the government was at the same time using every means at its disposal to secure the conviction of Aford chairman Chakufwa Chihana on sedition charges – on the basis that in March/April he had called for the kind of political reform

³⁶ *Daily Times*, 6 November 1992.

³⁷ *Daily Times*, 30 April 1993.

³⁸ *Daily Times*, 19 October 1992.

which was now getting underway! While the government was vulnerable to pressure, it was clear that the climate of intolerance would be slow to clear. Since the issue of the Pastoral Letter many sermons had been pointedly addressed to the national situation and numerous church leaders had been detained by the police, to be released after a few days when it became apparent that there was no case to take to the courts.³⁹ Church leaders also had to take their share of the invective which MCP leaders employed to denounce the "dissidents" and "confusionists" who were promoting political change. Finally one incident provoked Blantyre Synod into entering a strong protest. One of its ministers, Rev. Misanjo Kansilanga, who as Senior Clerk to the CCAP General Synod had been active in the formation of the PAC, was denounced as a dissident by an MCP district chairman at a public meeting at which the Life President was present. The district chairman remarked, "*Bwana kuli chiswe chanu ku MCP Headquarters... ndipo tithana nawo anthu oterewa*" which was taken to mean that the President had death squads at the MCP Headquarters who would deal with such people. The Synod wrote a very strong letter of protest, demanding a public apology.⁴⁰

No such apology was forthcoming but when the PAC and the PCD met on 13 November this issue was high on the agenda. They issued a joint statement indicating their resolve to "unreservedly deplore and condemn (1) all forms of political harassment, intimidation and abuse of political opponents; (2) all forms of incitement to violence and violence howsoever caused." The statement concludes with this remarkable undertaking: "the government further undertakes to: (1) prosecute all persons who engage in incitement to political violence and violence itself, without discrimination and to extend the equal protection of the law to all irrespective of their political opinion; (2) uphold the law and to protect the fundamental right of persons to hold political views."⁴¹ To secure even a paper commitment to promoting

³⁹ Perhaps the most celebrated of these was Rev. Aaron Longwe, a minister of Livingstonia Synod, who was detained and interrogated after delivering a sermon on Micah 7:1-7 in St Andrew's, Mzuzu on 26 April 1992. On his release he was told not to preach again from the book of Micah!

⁴⁰ Letter from the CCAP Synod of Blantyre to the Hon. J.Z.U. Tembo, Minister of State, on "Public Denunciation of the Rev. Misanjo E. Kansilanga", 6 November 1992.

⁴¹ Joint Statement by the President's Committee on Dialogue and the Public Affairs Committee, Kwacha Conference Centre, Blantyre, 13 November 1992.

a climate of tolerance was a significant achievement. Though MCP officials continued to abuse political opponents (notably in the arrest of UDF Chairman Bakili Muluzi on a charge of having embezzled some funds twelve years earlier), there was now a recognised standard against which their conduct would be measured. Great was the public outcry in December when it became known that the MCP chairman for Dedza district, Foster Mlombwa Phiri, had shot and killed a senior policeman who had incurred his wrath. It was widely regarded as a benchmark in the advance of the rule of law when Mlombwa Phiri was tried, found guilty and sentenced to death in March 1993.⁴² Though there continued to be many cases of harassment and intimidation, it was becoming clear that accountability was being established. The emergent independent press was to a great extent preoccupied with exposing alleged MCP abuse of power.⁴³ By March 1993, while there were still many obstacles to be overcome, Malawi had come a long way towards the climate of freedom, tolerance and accountability for which the church leaders had called. Certainly at the popular level there was profound appreciation of the new-found freedom. Indeed consciousness of the dramatic speed of change raised expectations to almost utopian levels.

Churches "Meddling" in Politics

Meanwhile the churches continued their much more confrontational critique of political developments. A good example was the sharp response of the Christian Council to the conviction and imprisonment of Aford chairman Chakufwa Chihana on charges of sedition: "The imprisonment of Mr. Chihana is inconsistent with the Joint Statement... by which Government undertook to 'uphold the law and to protect the fundamental rights of persons to hold political views.' The sedition law under which Mr. Chihana was convicted is itself inconsistent with the provisions of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights which Government signed on 2nd February, 1990.... Notwithstanding that the government has not lived up to its undertaking to the Organisation of African Unity, it is bound by the Charter

⁴² See, e.g. *The Flame*, 10–23 March 1993.

⁴³ See the January–June 1993 issues of *The Financial Observer*, *The Financial Post*, *The Flame*, *The Malawi Democrat*, *The Michiru Sun*, *The Monitor*, *The New Express*, and *UDF News*.

and is not entitled to rely on a sedition law which by its own wilful default it has failed to repeal."⁴⁴ The Council therefore called for, *inter alia*, the immediate and unconditional release of Mr. Chihana, the repeal of the sedition law, the fulfilment of international treaty obligations, and the creation of an atmosphere conducive to a free and fair referendum. The churches also made it plain that they intended to take a full part in the process leading up to the referendum. Very significant was the Blantyre Synod "Statement on the Role of the Church in the Transformation of Malawi in the Context of Justice and Peace." This offered a response to the oft-repeated charge of government officials that the church should not "meddle in politics":

Some people say that the Church should not be involved in politics. This reveals a general misunderstanding of the essence of the Church and role it plays in society. First of all, the Church is people and must be concerned with the well being of people. It is people themselves who create the political environment and therefore the Church as such cannot help but be involved in politics.... Yes, we believe the Church should be involved in the Referendum because the Church is the people of God who live in the world and are involved in the world and are therefore responsible for caring for the world and its people as well as making decisions which ensure justice and peace for all.⁴⁵

The Synod leadership then spelt out its intention to be actively involved in the referendum through educating people, promoting freedom of choice, monitoring at the polls, and prayer.

A more thorough and detailed treatment of the referendum was issued by the Catholic Bishops in the form of a Pastoral Letter entitled "Choosing our Future." The Bishops' assessment was: "What people are seeking is genuine democracy in which the leaders are servants of the people who elected them and not their masters, in which leaders are answerable and accountable for their actions to those they lead, a true government of the people; not a government by or for the privileged few."⁴⁶ The Letter aimed to be educational, explaining the issue

⁴⁴ Press Release, Christian Council of Malawi, 21 December 1992.

⁴⁵ "A Statement on the Role of the Church in the Transformation of Malawi in the Context of Justice and Peace", Produced by the Administrators Conference Blantyre Synod CCAP, January 1993, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁶ "Choosing our Future: Pastoral Letter to the Catholic Faithful on the occasion of the National Referendum 1993" The Episcopal Conference of Malawi, 2 February 1993.

to be decided by the referendum and listing the advantages and disadvantages of both single-party and multi-party systems. While genuinely attempting to be balanced, the Letter was read as a stinging indictment of the injustices of the Malawi system. This point was not lost on the government whose newspaper carried this response:

The contents of this letter are clearly advocating a multi-party system of government without considering the dangers that this system can bring to this country.... The Church is instilling FEAR and HATRED in the people. This is done every time people congregate at various churches. Democracy cannot be achieved when people are emotionally and spiritually charged. When civil disturbances occur in a country, prayers cannot stop them. It is the duty of a lawfully constituted Government to ensure that people live in harmony and peace. The strong arm of the law should not be mistaken for oppression.⁴⁷

With such statements the government itself testified to the telling effect which the church's witness had in mobilising public opinion and bringing the government to account. Despite persistent government complaints that the churches were interfering in a biased and partisan manner, they remained vitally involved in the referendum process. At local level this meant that congregations were sometimes directly instructed to vote multi-party. Officially, the churches restricted themselves to spelling out the principles which should guide people in voting. The gap between Christian principles and MCP rule was so obvious, however, that the church was clearly perceived to be on the side of political reform. With the exception of the Nkhoma Synod, the "mainstream" churches had effectively "taken sides" with the movement for democratic change. The victory of the multi-party advocates in the national referendum was welcomed with thanksgiving and the Public Affairs Committee took the initiative in pressing the government to speedily implement the process of transition to multi-party politics.

Some Preliminary Conclusions

A full assessment of the role of the churches in Malawi's political transition can only be made after some further years have passed. However, it is already clear that, to the surprise of many, when the

⁴⁷ *Malawi News*, 6–12 March 1993.

kairos came, the church was able to address its Gospel to the political life of the nation and be an effective agent of change. At least three factors can be identified to account for this outcome.

1. The churches were in touch with the people. When Roman Catholic Archbishop James Chiona was asked, after the issue of the Pastoral Letter of March 1992, what prompted him to speak out, he replied that the propaganda of the politicians was so out of touch with the experience of ordinary people that he felt obliged to be their voice.⁴⁸ Day to day experience in the parishes gave the church leaders an understanding of the real facts of life in Malawi – something which apparently eluded those who were confined to the rarefied atmosphere of the corridors of power. At a time of crisis this gave the churches a position of quite decisive political importance, particularly since they were the only bodies with the nationwide organisation to promote a grassroots movement for political reform. Since the legalization of political parties in July 1993 a number of political parties have emerged and vigorous political activity has been evident. It may be expected that the churches can now take a step back and allow the directly political activity to be conducted by political organisations. But in the early transitional phase from March 1992 they did have an indispensable role to play as the "midwives" at the birth of a new political order.

2. The importance of the catholic or international character of the church cannot be overemphasized. In the Catholic case, the Bishops were clearly deeply influenced by developments in the theology and witness of the church on a worldwide basis. On the Presbyterian side, the role of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in offering solidarity and practical support was of great value in enabling the Malawian leaders to take the effective stand which they did. This international solidarity made it much more difficult for the government to take action against church leaders whom it considered troublesome and certainly was a contributory factor in the speedy release of most of those who were arrested. The sensitivity of the government to these international links was demonstrated when members of the Public Affairs Committee went to England to confer with the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland from 17 to 19 February 1993. The

⁴⁸ Rev. Dr. J.C. Wigglesworth, a member of the WARC delegation, Press Conference, Edinburgh, 8 June 1992.

government insisted that its own ministerial delegation should attend the meeting to present its case and was humiliated and infuriated when the delegation was turned away from the church conference – which condemned the resistance of the Malawi government to democratic change.⁴⁹ The catholic character of the church, when given such practical expression, served to heighten its moral authority within the political arena.

3. Though the church's social criticism had been silenced for almost thirty years, yet the "dangerous memory" remained. The church held on to its scriptures and its tradition of worship and these were the sources from which a renewed social witness was developed. The churches had, in their scripture and tradition, an independent authority which they could use to measure and to judge the political life of the nation. The importance of such an independent yardstick in breaking the culture of deceit, established over many years by MCP propaganda, should not be underestimated. The catalyst which finally provoked the prophetic witness of the church was the realisation of the church leaders that faith and politics could not be kept in watertight compartments, that the Christian faith demands expression in the communal political life. This was true even of conservative Protestant denominations which might have been expected to take an apolitical stance but, in fact, took a full part in the actions of the Christian Council. To the dismay of the government, which regarded this as "meddling in politics", many, many sermons sought to relate biblical teaching directly to social and political affairs in Malawi. This contributed significantly to the grassroots awareness that the country was in need of radical political change and helped to produce the faith and hope that this could be achieved. The cost to the church was not only that its leaders were exposed to the wrath of the government but that it became a "site of struggle" It experienced in its own ranks the resistance of the old order and the birth pangs of the new, a struggle which was especially evident in the split between the Synods of the CCAP. Considerable turmoil is also evident within all of the churches as they themselves now face the Gospel demands of justice, freedom and democracy. Precisely by exposing themselves to the sharpness and pain of such conflict and challenge, the churches have brought to the surface the alienation which lay deep in Malawian society and initiated a process of judgement and repentance which is proving to

⁴⁹ *Daily Times*, 4 March 1993.

be powerfully transformative in the life of the nation. To the surprise of many, there are grounds for suggesting that the church, for all its divisions and failures, acted as a liberating force at a key turning point in Malawian history.

2. Presbyterian Theology and Participatory Democracy

Introduction

One notable feature of "Africa's second liberation" has been the active role of the Christian churches in the drive for social justice and participatory democracy. In the case of Malawi, analysts agree that the Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops at Lent 1992 was the spark which set ablaze the movement for political reform. Presbyterian church leaders threw their weight behind the momentum and carried it forward, particularly through the formation of the Public Affairs Committee – a Presbyterian initiative which enabled the reform movement to engage directly in the political process. No less significant has been the activity of the churches at the grass-roots parish level in offering the political education required for effective participation in the national referendum. The confidence of many voters who opted for democratic reform may well have been inspired, at least in part, by church education. These developments have caused some surprise and require explanation. To some degree the churches, like any other social institution, are being blown along by the winds of change which have arisen at this point in history. It would be misleading to attribute their emergence as agents of reform to "purely" religious inspiration. Indeed, recognition must be given to an element of opportunism in the rapid switch some churches have made from supporting the old order to appearing in the vanguard of the new. On the other hand, we should not underestimate the degree to which the churches have been energised in the struggle by drawing on the resources of their faith. It is with this theological component that this essay is concerned.

The aim is to examine one tradition of Christian theology in order to ascertain what, if any, contribution it may make to the establishment of participatory democracy. The Presbyterian (or "Reformed") tradition traces its origins to the Bible and the Church Fathers (especially Augustine) but emerged as a historically distinct entity with the Reformation of the 16th century. John Calvin in Geneva provided the

doctrinal inspiration and John Knox in Scotland was the Reformer who was able to put Presbyterianism most fully into practice on a national scale.¹ From Scotland, Presbyterianism spread worldwide and its churches are united today under the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. In 1875 it came to Malawi with the establishment of the Scottish missions of Blantyre and Livingstonia which subsequently became large Synods exercising considerable influence on national life.² The Presbyterian understanding of the Christian faith is distinguished not only by its church government (rule by Presbyteries, not bishops) but also by its theology. In this essay we will look at five distinctive points in Presbyterian theology: politics, sin, government, social justice, and vocation. An understanding of each of these points will clarify the relation of the church's theology to participatory democracy. It will assist the church to recognise that it has an ambiguous history in its social witness and has not always been true to its own beliefs. It may also offer some theological insights which could be of service to society as a whole at a time of reconstruction.

Faith and Politics

Throughout its history Presbyterianism has been distinguished by its commitment to social reform. In a recent study Nicholas Wolterstorff has argued persuasively that "the emergence of original Calvinism represented a fundamental alteration in Christian sensibility, from the vision and practice of turning away from the social world in order to seek closer union with God – to the vision and practice of working to

¹ There is an extensive literature on John Calvin. The H.H. Meeter Center for Calvin Studies at Calvin College, USA, holds some 3,000 books and 12,000 articles on Calvin. The most recent authoritative study is W.J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). The Scottish Reformation has also attracted a great deal of research but the standard work of reference remains G. Donaldson, *The Scottish Reformation*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1960). Also valuable is R. L. Greaves, *Theology and Revolution in the Scottish Reformation*, (Washington DC: Christian University Press, 1980).

² See K.J. McCracken, *Politics and Christianity in Malawi 1875–1940*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1977); A.C. Ross, "The Origins and Development of the Church of Scotland Mission, Blantyre, Nyasaland 1875–1926", (Ph.D., University of Edinburgh, 1968); K.N. Mufuka, *Missions and Politics in Malawi*, (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1977).

reform the social world in obedience to God."³ This shift in understanding constituted an important break from earlier Christian traditions, as Ernst Troeltsch recognised when he wrote that Calvinism was marked by:

a systematic endeavour to mould the life of society as a whole it lays down the principle that the Church ought to be interested in all sides of life, and it neither isolates the religious element over against the other elements, like Lutheranism, nor does it permit this sense of collective responsibility to express itself merely in particular institutions and occasional interventions in affairs, as in Catholicism.⁴

The Calvinists have been moved by the conviction that not only personal and church life are to be subject to the demands of the Gospel, but equally public and political life. They have recognised that there is much that is wrong with this world but have believed that it belongs rightfully to God and can be transformed in a godly direction. Therefore they have sought to address the word of the gospel to the social structures and the political order. As Jürgen Moltmann has summarised, on the Calvinist understanding, "the church wants the state to point towards the kingdom of God, not away from it. It wants God's grace to be reflected in the external, temporary dealings of the political community."⁵ This orientation of the faith gave rise to a theology of politics which proved to be of far-reaching significance both for the politics and for the theology.

As regards the politics, the Calvinist vision has a twofold effect – first of all, cutting politics down to size, then commissioning the politicians with a divine mandate. With its insistence that all of life is subject to the sovereignty of God, Calvinism first destroys the hubris which tends to creep in to all political ideologies and authority structures. It offers the constant reminder that no prevailing political order is absolute. Whatever its achievements may be, it remains provisional and is subject to criticism and reform in light of the criteria supplied

³ N. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 11.

⁴ E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, Vol. 2, (New York: Macmillan, 1931), p. 602.

⁵ J. Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*, (London: SCM, 1984), p. 89.

by the Word of God. Should the political authorities demand unconditional obedience, the believer will be obliged to point out that the authority of the state is relative and its commands must always be measured in terms of the higher obedience which is due to God. In extreme situations this can mean defiance of political authority. Allan Boesak, e.g., wrote to the South African Minister of Justice in 1979 that:

Over the years it has become clear to me that your government expects unconditional, blind obedience. I want to be honest with you, this I cannot give you. The believer in Christ has not only the right but also the responsibility, to be more obedient to God and his law than to the government, should this government deviate from God's law.⁶

This is a typically Calvinist approach – restricting and relativising political authority. Yet the same Calvinists have invested political life with an integrity and a seriousness in the divine economy which has not always been offered by other traditions.

Taking the Lordship of God as its starting point the Calvinist tradition has resisted any separation of the spiritual and secular spheres. Rather, the church and the state should be understood on the model of two concentric circles. The Christian congregation forms the smaller inner circle while the civil community forms the larger outer circle. The common hub of the two circles is Jesus Christ and the proclaimed kingdom of God. On this basis Calvinists expect that the political order should in some measure reflect the character of the kingdom of God. Those entrusted with political office have that mandate. Indeed, as Calvin reminded Francis I of France, "that king who in ruling over his realm does not serve God's glory exercises not kingly rule but brigandage."⁷ Or, to hear Calvin state the matter positively, "if [those who govern] remember that they are vicars of God, they should watch with all care, earnestness and diligence, to represent in themselves to men some image of divine providence, protection, goodness, benevolence and justice."⁸ While Calvinism resists all absolutizing

⁶ A. Boesak, Letter to the South African Minister of Justice, 1979; cit. C. Villa-Vicencio, *Between Christ and Caesar: Classic and Contemporary Texts on Church and State*, (Cape Town: David Philip; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 236–37.

⁷ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J.T. McNeill and F.L. Battles, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Vol. 1, p. 12.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV xx 6.

tendencies in politics, it also invests political life with a powerful positive vocation in the service of God and his kingdom. As Moltmann has summarized, "The church does not divinize politics, but it does not demonize politics either"⁹ Such an understanding of political life clearly causes it to fall within the remit of the theologian. "Politics is too important to be left to the politicians." Theology, on the Calvinist understanding, is one discipline which must concern itself with political life. Any notion that faith and politics might be kept separate is dismissed as naive. There is a recognition that politics needs religion. Even Machiavelli realised that the ruler must *seem* to be moral and religious! As Philip Wogaman recently observed, "Any political philosophy remains incomplete unless it has reference to a vision of what is ultimately true and ultimately good, and that is the contribution of theological traditions."¹⁰

The danger that constantly dogs the church is that of being uncritically pressed into service to supply legitimation to the prevailing political order of the day. It is a mistake to imagine that the church has a choice as to whether or not to be "political" It is always active as a political factor. When governments complain about the church being "too political" what they usually mean is that they want the church to supply unquestioning legitimation of the status quo rather than raising awkward questions of justice! In the Malawi context this need for religious legitimation partly explains why the ruling Malawi Congress Party was so stung by the critical analysis offered by the Catholic Bishops at Lent 1992. It also explains why the government attached such great importance to the continuing support of Nkhoma Synod after all other "mainline" churches had withdrawn their legitimation. Finally, when even Nkhoma Synod's support became lukewarm, the MCP sought to supply its own religious legitimation, an effort which culminated in the closing weeks of the referendum campaign with the cartoon series on the theme – "MCP Points to God!; MULTIPARTY – Horns of the Devil!"¹¹ Such desperate propaganda reveals how much the MCP government depended on the legitimation it received from the churches during the preceding years. In January 1993 the Blantyre Synod recognised, with repentance, that:

⁹ Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, p. 88.

¹⁰ J.P. Wogaman, *Christian Perspectives on Politics*, (London: SCM, 1988), p. 110.

¹¹ See, e.g., *Guardian Today*, Vol. 1 No. 7, May 19–25 1993.

After Independence the CCAP was aligned closely with the government and became so assimilated with the government's activities that the Synod was often invited to pray and participate as a church at various government functions. However, because of this assimilation and alignment with MCP, the Church gradually lost its ability to admonish or speak pastorally to the government.¹²

This is the kind of ideological captivity into which the church has too often fallen. As Jose Miguez-Bonino remarked in an influential recent study, "We urgently need a Christian ethic of politics, precisely in order that we may avoid a wrong politicization of Christianity."¹³

This is what the Presbyterian tradition, at least at its best moments, has sought to supply. The *Scots Confession* of 1560, e.g., offered three hermeneutical principles to guide our understanding of the faith: "We dare not receive or admit any interpretation which is contrary to any principal point of our faith, or to any other plain text of Scripture, or to the rule of love."¹⁴ The last point, the rule of love, reminds us that the Christian faith is a matter of what we do, not only a matter of what we know. It has to be lived and that living out of the faith includes a political expression. This is what Karl Barth had in mind when he told the World Alliance at its Cardiff meeting of 1925 that the "old Reformed Creed" was "wholly ethical" and was always addressed to the public sphere.¹⁵ Faithfulness to the ethical demands of the Gospel embraced political life as an area in which the meaning of Christian faith and discipleship must be expressed. Calvinists have taken with them through the centuries the conviction that their faith demands to be expressed and worked out in the political life of the community. This is not a matter of unwarranted "meddling" It is built into the very meaning of the faith.

¹² *A Statement on the Role of the Church in the Transformation of Malawi in the Context of Justice and Peace*, Produced by the Administrators Conference, Blantyre Synod CCAP, January 22-23, 1993, p. 4.

¹³ J. Miguez-Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983,) p. 17

¹⁴ *Scots Confession*, chap. 18.

¹⁵ Cit. J.W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Cape Town: David Philip, 1991), p. 211.

Sin, Repentance and Democracy

One point in Christian theology on which particular stress has been laid in the Calvinist tradition is the doctrine of sin. Calvinists maintain that the human condition is one of "total depravity", meaning not that everyone is as bad as they possibly could be, but that the effects of sin have spread through the totality of human life. The political order is not exempt from sin and therefore Calvinists are critical in their attitude towards the exercise of power and domination in society. They apply what is sometimes called the "hermeneutics of suspicion" to the existing social structures, expecting that sin will have corrupted them. Those who exercise power will, on account of their sinfulness, be inclined to pursue self-interest at the expense of God's purposes and the welfare of society as a whole. This serious reckoning with sin makes Calvinists suspicious of all social and political institutions, particularly when they display tendencies towards self-absolutization. As Abraham Kuyper, the noted Dutch politician-theologian, once stated:

Calvinism protests against state-omnipotence; against the horrible conception that no right exists above and beyond existing laws; and against the pride of absolutism which recognises no constitutional rights, except as the result of princely favour.¹⁶

All laws, institutions and authority structures in society are subject to this hermeneutic of suspicion. It operates to "demystify" politics, insisting that its structures, symbols and rhetoric are not sacred but, like all of human life, subject to sin.

It was his intense awareness of the way in which sin corrupts and controls the exercise of power which led Calvin to write the words which have been described as "the seedbed of modern democracy":

Men's fault or failing causes it to be safer and more bearable for a number to exercise government, so that they may help one another, teach and admonish one another; and, if one asserts himself unfairly, there may be a number of censors and masters to restrain his wilfulness.¹⁷

¹⁶ A. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), p. 89.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV xx 8.

The consideration which led Calvin to prefer the presbyterian to the episcopal model of church government is here applied directly to the political order. People who are given unlimited power will, under the effects of sin, always be tempted to use it to benefit themselves at the expense of others. Hence Calvin saw that there was a need for controls, for "checks and balances" against the abuse of power. Building on this insight the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr framed his oft-quoted dictum: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."¹⁸ It is *possible* because there remains even in fallen humanity the longing for justice which enables people to participate positively in the organisation of society. It is *necessary* because without accountability there is a high likelihood that power will be grossly abused.

Calvinist awareness of the persistency and pervasiveness of human sinfulness operates as a theological imperative for there to be legal safeguards against the abuse of power. This may lead Presbyterians, e.g., to advocate on theological grounds the passing of the kind of Bill of Rights which would ensure that no future government would be able to infringe the basic human rights of its citizens. The fact that human beings can be counted on to be sinful means that nobody is to be trusted too much. There is need for the fabric of controls, checks and balances which characterize the democratic society. In addition to keeping sin under control, Calvinist theology is also concerned to make known the positive antidote to sin which it describes as repentance (*metanoia*). This is understood not only as an initial break with sin but as a dynamic lifelong movement towards the renewal of life in its entirety. John Leith wrote of Calvin's understanding of repentance that it (like the sin which it counteracts), is "coextensive with the whole of life, that is, penetrating into every area of human existence and extending through all of life."¹⁹ This dynamic of repentance, while it is profoundly challenging at the personal level, could not be confined to private or domestic life. It had a momentum which carried it irresistibly into the realm of social reform. At least the best moments in the Presbyterian tradition indicate how evangelical con-

¹⁸ R. Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, (New York: Scribner's, 1944), p. 19.

¹⁹ J. Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 68.

version is bound up with the liberation of society as a whole. Just as there is no part of human life and society uncorrupted by sin, so there is no part of human life and society which cannot be reached and transformed by the power of repentance.

Tyranny and Accountability in Government

If there was one thing which Calvin was clearly against, it was tyrannical government. "There is nothing that men endure with more distress than to have a yoke laid on them, nor do they willingly submit to the despotic rule of the powerful." Only a degraded people could "prefer the yoke of tyranny to the inconveniences of change." Tyrants are hated "by the whole world," so that, "when they are dead or ruined, everybody rejoices and expresses feelings he had previously dissembled through fear." God himself, Calvin thought, cannot endure tyrants; he listens in sympathy to the "secret groans" of those who live under them.²⁰ Where a government through its abuse of its office becomes "an enemy of the common good", then that government has forfeited its claim on the obedience and support of Christian people. Passive disobedience will be a duty for all Christians when their obedience to God requires them to disregard the wicked commands of tyrannical rulers. Active resistance may also be necessary but this, Calvin maintained, is the vocation of the "lesser magistrates" The ordinary people are called to suffer and to pray, not to resist. But where there are magistrates, elected representatives of the people whose office is ordained by God, then,

I am so far from forbidding them to withstand the fierce licentiousness of kings in accordance with their duty, that, if they wink at kings who violently fall upon and assault the lowly common folk, I declare that their dissimulation involves nefarious perfidy, because they dishonestly betray the freedom of the people, of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by God's ordinance Let the princes hear and be afraid!²¹

"Lesser magistrates" is a flexible category and would certainly apply, e.g., in the contemporary Malawi context, to the Public Affairs Committee. Indeed so broad is the concept that, as Winthrop Hudson

²⁰ Cit. Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, p. 208.

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV xx 31.

remarked, "It was possible to legalize almost any revolt while remaining technically faithful to the teachings of Calvin."²²

John Knox developed Calvin's doctrine of resistance so to lay responsibility for the overthrow of tyranny not only on duly constituted officials but on all the people of God. In his *Letter to the Commonality of Scotland*, Knox warned,

Be not deceived, dear brethren, God has in the past punished not only proud tyrants, filthy persons and cruel murderers. He has also punished those together with them who have been responsible for the yoke of iniquity, whether by flattering their offences, obeying their unjust commandments, or overlooking their manifest iniquity.²³

In an extraordinary reversal of traditional teaching Knox assured the people that they would not be damned for resisting tyrannical authority; they would be damned if they failed to resist! It is probably not coincidental that historically Calvinism has had a strong appeal to the "underdog". As Charles Villa-Vicencio observes: "Calvin's theology is primarily a theology of protest. It binds people in a covenant with God as a basis for transforming and renewing society, and this instinctively appeals where the oppressed are locked in conflict with the oppressor."²⁴ Responsibility for government is placed on the shoulders not only of the rulers but also the lesser magistrates, as representatives of the people, and, ultimately, the people themselves.

As well as energising and empowering the ordinary people to undertake political responsibility, Knox's teaching promoted an important awareness of the accountability of government. The Scots Confession stated the Christian responsibility towards government in these terms: "It is our duty to honour father, mother, princes, rulers, and superior powers: to love them, to support them, yes, to obey their charges unless repugnant to the Word of God. To save the lives of the innocent, to repress tyranny, to defend the oppressed."²⁵ The point that is

²² W.S. Hudson, *John Ponet (1516?–1556): Advocate of Limited Monarchy*, (Chicago: University Press, 1942), pp. 194–95.

²³ J. Knox, *A Letter to the Commonality of Scotland*, in D. Laing ed., *The Works of John Knox*, Vol. IV, (Edinburgh: James Thin, 1895), pp. 539–40.

²⁴ C. Villa-Vicencio, *Civil Disobedience and Beyond: Law, Resistance and Religion in South Africa*, (Cape Town: David Philip; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 81

²⁵ *Scots Confession*, chap. 14.

made very clear is that the subjection of Christians to the government of the day is conditional. The government is made accountable to the standards laid down in the "Word of God." Should it fail to meet these standards it will have forfeited the right to expect obedience and cooperation from Christian citizens. No government can be a "law unto itself" for the church remains obliged to measure the policies and actions of the government against the norm or criterion of the biblical message of the kingdom of God. Where an unjust and oppressive system of government is established and held in place by tight control and powerful propaganda it is possible to develop such a culture of deceit that people lose their bearings and even their thinking is "colonized" by the "system." The Christian proclamation is one force which can break through that false consciousness by making the system accountable to the enduring norms and values of the kingdom of God. The Malawian experience from the Cabinet Crisis of 1964 to the Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter of 1992 is a classic case. Johan-Baptist Metz has written of the "dangerous memory" or "subversive memory" of Jesus Christ which the church carries through history. Time and again "this definite memory breaks through the magic circle of the prevailing consciousness."²⁶ By repeatedly weighing the existing order against the demands of God's impending kingdom the church supplies a gauge which frees people to make their own assessment of the prevailing system and to take action accordingly.

The Calvinist teaching on tyranny and accountability in government raises sharply the question of legitimacy. Drawing on the classical, patristic and scholastic traditions and out of their own engagement with the biblical witness, the Reformers reached the conclusion that "the government that perpetrates injuries of an atrocious and notorious character has lost its legitimacy, and the officers of such a government have only the status of private citizens who have committed criminal acts."²⁷ The Presbyterian tradition, following Knox, affirms that, in extreme circumstances, it is legitimate to remove such a government from office by means of revolutionary violence. When things are measured by the standards of the kingdom of God we may understand, as Aquinas had earlier stated, that "disturbing such a government has not the nature of sedition... Indeed it is the tyrant

²⁶ J.B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, (London: Burns & Oates, 1980), pp. 89–90.

²⁷ Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, p. 144.

rather that is more guilty of sedition. "28 The difficulty, given the complexity and ambiguity of political issues, is to determine *when* a particular government has forfeited its legitimacy. The church has generally been willing to go a long way in giving a dubious government the benefit of the doubt. But there does come a time when a particular regime has so conclusively proved itself to be tyrannical that the church has to make it clear that it has forfeited its legitimacy. Such a time came, e.g., in 1985 when the South African Council of Churches issued its *Call to Prayer for the End to Unjust Rule*:

The considered judgement of every synod, assembly and conference of the Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant Churches (with the exception of the Africaans Reformed Churches) has been that the present regime, together with its structures of domination, stands in contradiction to the Christian Gospel to which the churches of the land seek to remain faithful. We have continually prayed for the authorities, that they may govern wisely and justly. Now, in solidarity with those who suffer most, in this hour of crisis we pray that God in His grace may remove from His people the tyrannical structures of oppression and the present rulers in our country who persistently refuse to heed the cry for justice, as reflected in the Word of God.²⁹

The application of the norms and criteria of the word of God may result in a particular government being declared illegitimate. It then becomes the Christian responsibility to pray and work for its removal from office. Calvinist teaching on tyranny, legitimacy and accountability of government in this way places considerable political responsibility in the hands of the ordinary people.

The Drive for Social Justice

The Calvinist tradition, though it has often failed to live up to its own standards, is marked by what is described in contemporary theology as the "preferential option for the poor". Calvin himself mapped out this orientation to the poor: "the Lord recommends to us that we may, insofar as everyone's resources admit, afford help to the needy, so that

28 T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a 2ae (42,2); cit. Villa-Vicencio, *Civil Disobedience*, p. 85.

29 South African Council of Churches, *A Theological Rationale and a Call to Prayer for the End to Unjust Rule*, 1985; cit. Villa-Vicencio, *Between Christ and Caesar*, pp. 247-49.

there may not be some in affluence, and others in need."³⁰ "Those who have riches", he insisted, "whether inherited or won by their own industry and labour, are to remember that what is left over is not meant for intemperance or luxury, but for relieving the needs of the brethren."³¹ Where society is divided and one group is benefiting at the expense of another, there must be no hesitation in taking sides. As Abash Kuyper told the Christian Social Congress in 1891, the Calvinist position is that, "when rich and poor stand opposed to each other, Jesus never takes his place with the wealthier, but always stands with the poorer.... Both the Christ, and also just as much his disciples after him as the prophets before him invariably took sides *against* those who were powerful and living in luxury, and *for* the suffering and oppressed."³² Likewise, in what has become a celebrated passage from the *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth wrote that, "The human righteousness required by God and established in obedience – the righteousness which according to Amos 5:24 should pour down as a mighty stream – has necessarily the character of a vindication of right in favour of the threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, widows and orphans, and aliens. For this reason, in the relations and events in the life of people, God always takes his stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and on this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied and deprived of it."³³ Such a radical orientation to the dispossessed and disadvantaged sections of society cannot fail to operate as a powerful political dynamic in the drive for social justice. It seeks to inject bias into the political process, i.e. that it should be biased in favour of the poor. It attempts to bring to bear the perspective of the impoverished masses on the political life of the day. It recognised, with Miguez-Bonino, that "the poor are not morally or spiritually superior to others, but they do see reality from a different angle or location – and therefore differently."³⁴ This is the angle or location from which the church is

³⁰ Cit A. Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, (New York: Orbis, 1984), p. 90.

³¹ J. Calvin, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 14; cit. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, p. 79 (comment on 2 Corinthians 8:15).

³² A. Kuyper, *Christianity and the Class Struggle*, (Grand Rapids: Piet Hein, 1950), pp. 27, 50; cit. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, p. 73.

³³ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II/1, (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1957), p. 386.

³⁴ Miguez-Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics*, p. 43.

mandated to approach political realities: Taking sides with the poor means seeking the political empowerment of the masses of ordinary people who tend to be excluded and exploited.

The distinctive role of the church is that it brings to this socio-political engagement a particular vision. It looks at the existing situation in light of the eschatological horizon of the coming kingdom of God. This has a twofold effect. On the one hand, it energises social reform. The vision of "what *will* be" acts as a social lure or incentive, drawing society forward in the direction of the justice and freedom which will ultimately prevail in the kingdom of God. On the other hand, it relativizes all the social and political objectives and achievements. Present liberatory events are not, and cannot be, the whole of salvation. We never take part in the social revolution after which we say, "that is it, we have reached our goal, there is nothing more to be accomplished." The eschatological hope makes us always restless, looking to the next frontier, the next challenge, knowing that whatever may have been achieved is still provisional and requires to be continuously reformed in the direction of the coming kingdom of God. "Grace," said Karl Barth, "is the axe laid at the root of the good conscience which the politician and the civil servant always wish to enjoy."³⁵ The eschatological vision ever reminds us that we are still on the way, that there is still much to be done. It is for this reason that Calvinism has been described as a theology of "permanent revolution".³⁶ It militates powerfully against the sacralization or absolutization of any political ideology and drives forward the process of social renewal in the direction of the coming kingdom of God.

At the same time, the eschatological vision does not bring about resignation or apathy regarding the cause of social reform. On the contrary, it opens up the great positive possibility of causing the social and political order to point towards and not away from the kingdom of God. The ultimate vision *must* be allowed to take effect in practical politics. As Villa-Vicencio writes: "Responsible political theology must be utopian and priests are obliged to be turbulent and (annoyingly) visionary in even the most socially responsible societies. And yet, the church must also be realistically committed to what is

³⁵ K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 430.

³⁶ Paul Lehmann, cit. Villa-Vicencio, *Civil Disobedience*, p. 132.

attainable here and now as part of a greater vision.... At the centre of this theology is the integration of an ultimate vision which disturbs the status quo that emerges at any given time, while promoting concrete proposals which provide the best possible solution to the specific needs of the time."³⁷ While one eye is fixed on the ultimate vision, the other is resolutely looking for what John Bennett called "the next step that our generation needs to take."³⁸ With its orientation to the marginalised and its disturbing, yet ultimately constructive, eschatological vision, the Calvinist tradition offers theological resources for renewing society in the direction of greater justice and participation.

The Popular Sense of Vocation

One of the most revolutionary insights of the Reformation was its teaching that "vocation" is not the preserve of the elite few but the privilege of every Christian. "Worldly" occupations are blessed by God and form the sphere in which God may be glorified. Whatever one's function in society may be, it can be recognised as a divine vocation. All labour was thus sanctified, and believers were liberated by the Gospel for service in the world as part of what it means to be a Christian. This had a powerful effect on popular consciousness. As Calvin himself stated, "Nothing can fill us with courage more than the knowledge that we have been called by God."³⁹ This empowerment of ordinary people took effect not only at the personal and individual level but also in institutional and social life. It was immediately apparent in the structure of church government. The clerical hierarchy was abolished and ordinary people who were elected as church elders were entrusted with the responsibility of governing the affairs of the church. But the new understanding of vocation was also a factor to be reckoned with in economic and political life. It energised individuals and groups within society to engage actively in political reform. This

³⁷ C. Villa-Vicencio, *A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-Building and Human Rights*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1992), pp. 31, 275.

³⁸ J. Bennett, *Christian Ethics and Social Policy*, (New York: Scribner's, 1946), pp. 76-77.

³⁹ J. Calvin, *Commentary on I Timothy 6:12*; cit. J.R. Walchenbach, "Vocation", in D.K. McKim & D.F. Wright eds., *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press; Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1992), p. 387.

was a historic development in the evolution of participatory democracy. As Michael Walzer wrote, in a seminal study

The idea that specially designated and organized bands of men might play a creative part in the political world, destroying the established order and reconstructing society according to the Word of God or the plans of their fellows – this idea did not enter at all into the thought of Machiavellian, Luther or Bodin. It was the Calvinists who first switched the emphasis of political thought from the prince to the saint (or the band of saints) and then constructed a theoretical justification for independent political action.... This is surely the most significant outcome of the Calvinist theory of worldly activity, preceding in time any infusion of religious worldliness into the economic order.⁴⁰

Fired by a sense of divine vocation the Calvinists had the confidence that *they*, the people, might be the agents of significant political change. This is a dynamic powerful to sweep away the passivity and "victim mentality" which can obstruct democratic participation. Indeed, with its specific orientation to the poor and oppressed, the church is well placed to offer empowerment to those most likely to be excluded from any responsible part in the political process. The liberty promised by Christ acts as a theological imperative in the promotion of maximum participation of all people in political and economic structures of power. Indeed it is doubtful whether participatory democracy can thrive without such a moral and spiritual drive and dynamic. The decadence of certain Western democracies may be explained, at least in part, by their weakness at this point. Through its promotion of a popular sense of vocation the Calvinist tradition has much to offer to the development not only of democratic structures but of the participation which makes them effective.

Conclusion

It would be far-fetched to suggest that Presbyterian theology has anything to offer in the nature of a formula for successful participatory democracy. What can be argued, however, is that the political process does need some kind of theological vision and that the Presbyterian tradition does have critical theological insights which can

⁴⁰ M. Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1966), pp. 1–2.

contribute to the development of participatory democracy. This should not be said in a spirit of triumphalism. On the contrary, an attitude of repentance is more in order. As Charles Villa-Vicencio has observed: "In many situations the church is today more authoritarian, more hierarchical, more oppressive and less democratic, less participatory and less liberating than the state."⁴¹ Judgement begins with the house of God! Moreover, Calvinism has been particularly prone to become self-righteous and imperialistic. When the will-to-order has fallen into ideological captivity Calvinists have become the worst of oppressors. Their sense of election has all too easily been perverted into domination and exploitation of others. Their drive to reshape the world according to the justice of God has degenerated into self-righteous triumphalism. They might well ponder John Mulder's observation that Calvinism has "worked fairly well as a theology of politics as long as it combatted political power, as long as it remained outside the arena of actual power."⁴² This may be where the deepest challenge lies with regard to the church's social witness. When the church-inspired social revolution is successful, what then? Villa-Vicencio offers the sobering assessment that: "Despite the theological opportunity to begin anew that has come with every major political or ecclesial revolution, the church has never succeeded in exercising a positive, liberating and prophetic role within the structures of power. It has been either essentially excluded from the political decision-making process, or used as an instrument of ideological self-legitimation."⁴³

Presbyterianism can claim no greater success in this respect than any other section of the church. What it does have is theological resources which are waiting to be harnessed in the task of developing participatory democracy. The duty of the church to address its message to the political realm, the political implications of sin and repentance, the understanding of tyranny, legitimacy and accountability in government, the drive for social justice, and the popular sense of vocation – all of these are prominent features in Presbyterian theology, all serve to vindicate the need for participatory democracy, and all able to supply such a system with the inner motivation without which it cannot succeed. At its best moments in

⁴¹ Villa-Vicencio, *Theology of Reconstruction*, p. 47.

⁴² John M. Mulder, cit. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, p. 257

⁴³ Villa-Vicencio, *Theology of Reconstruction*, p. 20.

the past, the Presbyterian way of understanding the Christian faith has made a mark for social justice and the promotion of democratic participation. If it can recover and redeploy the best of its tradition there is no reason why it may not do so again today.

3. The Kingdom of God and Contemporary Politics: Theological Reflection on Social Transformation in Malawi

Introduction: Eschatology and History

During the one-party era in Malawi, from 1964 to 1993, there were severe restrictions on the church's public witness on political issues. In the repressive climate of these years church leaders, with few exceptions, refrained from addressing the Word of God critically to the political life of the country.¹ The church's message was concerned with personal spirituality and morality, with preparing oneself for the next world.² Prayers were made for the political leadership but the gospel of Jesus Christ was not understood as having a direct bearing on the direction and conduct of political life. This situation changed literally overnight with the issue of the Catholic Bishops' celebrated Pastoral Letter of 8 March 1992.³ Suddenly, in parishes all over the country, Christians realised that their faith had much to say in relation

¹ Notable exceptions include, *inter alia*, the sermons preached by Rev Dr Saindi Chipangwi, the General Secretary of the CCAP Blantyre Synod in the early 1980s, the protest sermon of Rev Peter Kaleso following the alleged murder of four prominent politicians at Mwanza in 1983, the funeral service conducted for one of the four (David Chiwanga) by Bishop Felix Mkhori of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Chikwawa. Archbishop James Chiona of Blantyre was also, on occasion, critical of Malawi Congress Party ideology and sympathetic to the plight of the poor. See J.C. Chakanza, "The Pro-democracy Movement in Malawi: The Catholic Church's Contribution 1960–1992", *Religion in Malawi*, No. 4 (1994), pp. 12–13. Account must also be taken of the silent witness of, e.g., Christian women who refused to dance at political rallies when these were held on the sabbath – a powerful statement of the limits of political authority. There is need for full documentation of the history of the church's social witness during the one-party era.

² See, e.g., K.R. Ross, *The Message of Mainstream Christianity in Malawi: An Analysis of Contemporary Preaching*, University of Malawi, Sources for the Study of Religion in Malawi No. 17 (1993), pp. 5–14, 27–30.

³ *Living our Faith*, Lenten Pastoral Letter from the Roman Catholic Bishops of Malawi, 8 March 1992.

to political issues. Within six months the churches had united to form the Public Affairs Committee, a representative body which "took on" the one-party system and paved the way for the national referendum of 1993 and the subsequent transition to multi-party politics.⁴ The significance of the role played by church leaders can perhaps be gauged from the 1994 New Year's Message of UDF President Bakili Muluzi in which he addressed the question of opposition unity:⁵

Our openness to unity is also in response to pleadings from the clergy. Immediately after the referendum the clergy made repeated calls for opposition unity. The clergy is made up of messengers of God through whom God sent a message that Malawi was ripe for change. Having committed ourselves to fight for democracy in response to the divine call it would be preposterous and contradictory to turn a deaf ear to the pleadings of the same divine messengers.⁶

Muluzi may have been "playing the religion card" to his own political advantage. Yet his words are representative of a recovery of the sense that political life is subject to religious constraints. The separation of politics and religion under the one-party system appears to have been a temporary aberration, quite alien to the traditional African understanding. As Francois Kabasele has written: "Among the Bantu the bond between the political and the religious means that the chief must conform to the religious ideals and practices of the people's ancestral experience, which are at the same time their conception of life and their social ethic."⁷ It is therefore not surprising that the Malawian people, moulded by that tradition, have responded to a religiously inspired initiative to reform the political system.

4 See, e.g., *Malawi: A Moment of Truth*, (London: CIIR, 1993); and K.R. Ross, "Not Catalyst But Ferment: The Distinctive Contribution of the Churches to Political Reform in Malawi 1992-93", Law/Theology Seminar, Chancellor College, University of Malawi, 29-30 October 1993.

5 The United Democratic Front was one of the two "pressure groups" which campaigned for the introduction of multi-party democracy in Malawi. After the national referendum of June 1993 was decided in favour of introducing a multi-party system, the UDF registered as a party and succeeded in winning the Presidential Election held on 17 May 1994.

6 *The Enquirer*, Vol. 2 No. 1 (January 1994).

7 F. Kabasele, "Christ as Chief", in R.J. Schreiter ed., *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, (London: SCM, 1992), p. 110.

What may be more difficult to understand is the question of how such reform is related to the kingdom of God proclaimed by the church. Having emerged from a context in which the kingdom of God was often presented as being concerned with a realm quite separate from contemporary society, it is possible to swing in the opposite direction and to understand the saving action of God as being entirely a matter of social transformation. If the political transformation in Malawi is recognised to be God's liberative action, then what is the relation of such action to God's ultimate, eschatological action which is described as the kingdom of God? This is a question which taxes the Christian community in Malawi as it seeks to come to terms with a new era. It is also a question which is near the centre of contemporary theological debate worldwide. As Theo Witvliet comments: "The relationship between eschatology and history is perhaps the central problem in the confrontation between dominant theological traditions and forms of liberation theology."⁸ The purpose of this paper is to enter into that debate with a view to addressing the question of how the church in Malawi might understand itself and its message in relation to the new political order. Given that (most of) the church has accepted responsibility for socio-political engagement, how is that social witness to be understood in relation to the kingdom of God which is the church's ultimate concern and commitment?⁹ While it arises out of the Malawi experience, this essay will address the question at a theoretical level and will draw on the experience of the church in various contexts around the world.

Divine Salvation and Political Struggle: Not Two Histories

During the last 25 years the Christian Church has entered an era in which most of its members are the victims of poverty and oppression.¹⁰ This has provoked a wide-ranging theological

⁸ T. Witvliet, *A Place in the Sun*, (London: SCM, 1985), p. 45.

⁹ In November 1993 the Government called for the dissolution of the Public Affairs Committee on the ground that it was no longer needed. PAC, however, signalled its commitment to continuing its work by electing new officebearers and making plans for a new constitution in February 1994. See *The Nation*, Vol. 1 No. 61, 21 February 1994.

¹⁰ An early attempt to assess the significance of the southward shift in the church's

reappraisal and, in particular, has brought new sharpness and urgency to the recurrent question of the evangelical/eschatological significance of the contemporary struggle for social justice and liberation. A leading theme in contemporary Third World theology is a rejection of the alleged "over-spiritualization" of the gospel in the Western tradition and a recovery of the integral connection between human liberation and divine salvation.¹¹ First to sound the trumpet was Gustavo Gutierrez of Peru. In his influential *A Theology of Liberation* Gutierrez sought to argue that "the struggle for a just society is in its own right very much a part of salvation history."¹² Responding to criticisms that he was sacrificing the gospel of salvation to mere political concerns, Gutierrez wrote:

Those who reduce the work of salvation are indeed those who limit it to the strictly 'religious' sphere and are not aware of the universality of the process. It is those who think that the work of Christ touches the social order in which we live only indirectly or tangentially, and not in its roots and basic structure. It is those who in order to protect salvation (or to protect their interests) lift salvation from the midst of history, where individuals and social classes struggle to liberate themselves from the slavery and oppression to which other individuals and social classes have subjected them. It is those who refuse to see that the salvation of Christ is a radical liberation from all misery, all despoliation, all alienation. It is those who by trying to 'save' the work of Christ will 'lose' it.¹³

Divine salvation is not reserved exclusively for another world. According to Gutierrez, it takes effect now in our world through the struggle to eradicate injustice, violence and oppression. In human liberation we encounter divine salvation.

centre of gravity can be found in A.F. Walls, "Towards Understanding Africa's Place in Christian History", in J.S. Pobee ed., *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), pp. 180-189; see also W. Bühlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church*, (Slough: St Paul Publications, 1976); W.A. Dyrness, *Learning About Theology from the Third World*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

¹¹ Liberation theologians have led the way but their concerns are echoed in the conservative evangelical constituency. See, e.g., V. Samuel & C. Sugden eds., *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), especially chapters 1, 2, 3 and 15; D.S. Walker, *Challenging Evangelicalism: Prophetic Witness and Theological Renewal*, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1993).

¹² G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, (London SCM, 1988, 1st pub. 1971, E.T. 1973), p. 97.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 104.

Not uncommonly the conviction has arisen in the Christian community that "salvation history" is entirely dissociated from "ordinary history" and that genuine concern for the former involves an abdication of responsibility for the latter. Such manichaeistic dualism has been resisted in the work of such key theologians as Irenaeus and Calvin. They have perceived that the integrity of the Christian faith depends upon the interconnection between creation and redemption. God the Creator is the same God as the Redeemer whom we encounter in Jesus Christ.¹⁴ If we fail to make this connection then we end up with a dualistic understanding of history in which the kingdom of God has nothing at all to do with society at large. Against all such tendencies, it is necessary to maintain that the God of providence who sovereignly guides the affairs of the nations is one and the same God as the Father of Jesus Christ who calls us to enter his kingdom. Gutierrez has sound theological foundations for his statement that: "There are not two histories, one profane and one sacred, 'juxtaposed' or 'closely linked'. Rather there is only one human destiny, irreversibly assumed by Christ, the Lord of history. His redemptive work embraces all the dimensions of existence and brings them to their fullness. The history of salvation is the very heart of human history."¹⁵ The unity of history, with Christ at its centre, is basic to the Christian understanding of the world. Hence we may have the confidence that, as Miguez Bonino writes, "Jesus Christ does not come to superimpose a different, transcendent or celestial reality on top of the realm of nature and history, but to reopen for man the will and the power to fulfil his historical vocation."¹⁶

This drive to consider the kingdom of God in terms of contemporary social movements towards justice and wholeness has been carried forward in the southern African context by Albert Nolan's *God in South Africa*.¹⁷ Nolan argues powerfully that the proclamation of the gospel involves a prophetic reading of the "signs of the times": "If we simply repeat the formulas of the past, our words may have the

¹⁴ See, e.g., J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I vi 1.

¹⁵ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 86.

¹⁶ J. Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 166.

¹⁷ A. Nolan, *God in South Africa: The Challenge of the Gospel*, (Cape Town & Johannesburg: David Philip; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Gweru: Mambo; and London: CIIIR, 1988).

character of doctrine and dogma but they will not have the character of good news.... When we ask about the gospel in South Africa today, we are asking about *the role of God (and therefore Christ and the Spirit) in our present situation of crisis and conflict.*"¹⁸ This means, e.g., that "the crucifixion of God in Jesus Christ is, for us, the crucifixion of the oppressed people in our country."¹⁹ To believe in Jesus Christ, in the South African context, is to be engaged with the oppressed in their struggle for liberation: "the practice of the struggle is the practice of faith even when it is not accompanied by an explicit profession of faith in God or in Jesus Christ."²⁰ Nolan thus reaches the position that, far from God's salvation being separate from political liberation, in context God's salvation *is* political liberation. The question raised is whether this is too close an identification?

Gutierrez was careful to qualify his position at this point: "The historical, political liberating event *is* the growth of the kingdom and *is* a liberating event; but it is not *the* coming of the kingdom, not *all* of salvation."²¹ Still more sensitive to the question was the Argentinian liberation theologian Jose Miguez Bonino. While committed to the eschatological value of the present historical praxis of liberation, Miguez Bonino was aware of how easily political concerns can come to fill the whole horizon:

We come to speak of a love, a new man, a liberation in which the reference to the history of Israel, of Jesus Christ, of the apostles becomes secondary, or merely exemplary, or dispensable. If this happens we have, in Christian terms, vacated any reference to God himself. What God and whose kingdom are we speaking about? At the extreme of this line, we would conclude by deifying man and history and it would be more honest to call a spade a spade and to avow a total immanentism.... When the cause of Jesus Christ is totally and without rest equated with the cause of social and political revolution, either the Church and Jesus Christ are made redundant or the political and social revolution is clothed in a sacred or semi-sacred gown.²²

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 10,29, Nolan's italics.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

²¹ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p. 104.

²² Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, pp. 138–39, 163.

This, on Miguez Bonino's analysis, was a trap which liberation theology must avoid. On the other hand, it must not fall into the opposite trap of seeing too little of the kingdom in contemporary political events. In particular, he was critical of the tendency of European theology to understand the relation between the kingdom of God and historical action too indirectly: "The Kingdom is not merely adumbrated, reflected, foreshadowed, or analogically hinted at in the individual and collective realizations of love in history, but actually present, operative, authentically – however imperfectly and partially – realized."²³ While it is not totally absorbed in contemporary social issues, Miguez Bonino was confident that "the gospel invites and drives us to make concrete historical options and assures them eschatological permanence insofar as they represent the quality of human existence which corresponds to the Kingdom."²⁴ Neither too much nor too little is the kingdom of God to be identified with contemporary political struggle. How is the delicate balance to be maintained?

Penultimacy

When we begin to look for helpful vocabulary and conceptuality to address this question, one useful concept is that of penultimacy, which was first employed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the influential German theologian. Bonhoeffer belonged to the Lutheran tradition with its strong tendency to separate the gospel from "worldly" concerns. Yet the historical concerns of his life, especially his confrontation with Nazism, led him to reflect on the place of political struggle in relation to the kingdom of God. The results are found in his *Ethics*, written in 1940–41. Here Bonhoeffer posed the problem as that of the relation between the "ultimate" and the "penultimate" (i.e. "the things before the last").²⁵ Two possible solutions are suggested. The first is to see "only the ultimate, and in it only the complete breaking off of the penultimate. Ultimate and penultimate are here mutually exclusive contraries. Christ is the destroyer and enemy of everything penultimate, and everything penultimate is enmity towards

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, (London: SCM, 1955), p. 84.

Christ."²⁶ In this case the Christian has no concern or responsibility for society. The 'world' is about the perish and he or she must be concerned with what is eternal. The alternative is to isolate the two so as to concentrate attention in the opposite direction – to be concerned entirely with the penultimate. In this case "the penultimate retains its right on its own account, and is not threatened or imperilled by the ultimate. The world still stands; the end is not yet here; there are still penultimate things which must be done, in fulfillment of the responsibility for this world which God has created.... The ultimate remains totally on the far side of the everyday; it is thus, in fact, an eternal justification for things as they are."²⁷

The problem with both these possible solutions, Bonhoeffer argues, is that "they place the penultimate and the ultimate in a relation of mutual exclusiveness."²⁸ In Jesus Christ, however, both are held together:

(Jesus) neither renders the human reality independent nor destroys it, but he allows it to remain as that which is before the last, as a penultimate which requires to be taken seriously in its own way, and yet not to be taken seriously, a penultimate which has become the outer covering of the ultimate.... The hungry man needs bread and the homeless man needs a roof, the dispossessed need justice and the lonely need fellowship; the undisciplined need order and the slave needs freedom.... To provide the hungry man with bread is to prepare the way for the coming of grace. But what is happening here is a thing before the last. To give bread to the hungry man is not the same as to proclaim the grace of God and justification to him, and to have received bread is not the same as to have faith. Yet for him who does these things for the sake of the ultimate, and in the knowledge of the ultimate, this penultimate does bear a relation to the ultimate.²⁹

Bonhoeffer's opening up of the both the connections and the distinctions involved in the relation between the kingdom of God and contemporary politics offers a suggestive basis on which to proceed with the discussion. Action for justice and liberation in contemporary

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 85.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 86.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

²⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 90, 95.

history, while always penultimate and not to be confused with the kingdom, are integrally related to it.³⁰

The concept of penultimacy has been employed in an illuminating way by John de Gruchy in a recent exposition of Calvin's theology with reference to the South African situation.³¹ Calvin's eschatology ("the ultimate") was focused on the eternal destiny of the individual Christian. That horizon, on de Gruchy's analysis, remains fundamental: "Present liberatory events, significant as they are, are not and cannot be the whole of salvation."³² Christian hope finds its ultimate resting place only in the life which is to come. Yet there is also a *penultimate* focus of this same faith:

It is precisely this hope of eternal life, evoked through meditation on the victory of Christ and the promise of future life, that enables Christians to give their lives in the service of the gospel. The fact that Calvin's eschatology was not a way of escape from engagement in the world but rather a motivating source for witness and struggle sets him apart from much traditional Christian piety.... For Calvin the penultimate and the ultimate were integrally related: justice in this world and justification in the world to come. Eternal life was not contingent upon human effort. It was a gift of grace, but one

³⁰ Karl Barth also employed the concept of penultimacy in his discussion of eschatological hope: "Just because the Christian hopes for the ultimate and definitive, he also hopes for the temporal and provisional. Just because he hopes with joy for the dawn of the great light, he hopes with provisional joy for the little lights, which may come and go, but which will not come and go in vain, since as a temporary illumination they will help him to look and move more properly towards that which they can only indicate, but which in their time they can in fact indicate. Just because he hopes for the Last Day, for the eternal year, he hopes for the next day and the next year, from which, whatever they may bring, he can always expect at least new indications of the coming of Jesus Christ." K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, p. 938. While this is clearly an affirmation of the penultimate, Barth's use of the term "indicate" is vulnerable to the criticism that it, in fact, empties the penultimate of permanent eschatological content.

³¹ J.W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans & Cape Town: David Philip, 1991), pp. 243–81. De Gruchy has also used penultimacy as a conceptual tool in his earlier attempts to offer theological analysis of church and society in South Africa. See, e.g., J.W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 227–230, also J.W. de Gruchy, "Racism, Reconciliation and Resistance", in C. Villa–Vicencio ed., *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 139–155.

³² De Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, p. 280.

that called forth human response in this life, for this was precisely how eternal life was appropriated.³³

The concept of penultimacy may be one which can help us to avoid the *scylla* of being totally submerged in programmes of political reform and the *charybdis* of being lost in an altogether ethereal and other-worldly understanding of salvation.

Provisionality

Another concept which may be of service is that of provisionality. Here an illuminating starting point is South African Black Theology which has been considerably taxed by the question of how liberation movements in history are related to the eternal salvation in Jesus Christ which is pre-eminent in the New Testament proclamation. While Black Theology protests against the total separation of liberation and salvation, neither does it want to confuse them or speak as if they were exactly the same thing. There is an "eschatological reserve" which recognises that anything that is achieved now is at best provisional. The coming of the kingdom in its fullness belongs to the future and lies outwith the progress of this world's history. At the same time there is a sense in which the kingdom has come already and we may expect to see it taking effect, albeit partially and provisionally, in human life *now*, including its public and political expression. The direction which Black Theology seeks to take has been well-expressed by Simon Maimela:

Black Theology reminds people that their creative involvement with and under the guidance of God in overcoming sin and its destructive consequences is not futile, and not totally unnecessary and irrelevant to the final victory that will arrive with God's coming Kingdom. Rather this victory emerges out of the partial historical victories which God and committed Christians now win against evil, oppression and lovelessness. To be sure, God's coming Kingdom will include far more than these limited historical victories which God's saints and their Creator gradually win, but God's coming Kingdom is not entirely divorced from the present struggles in which the Saviour and his disciples are engaged, as they try together to humanize social conditions. And because of the continuity between the human political work of liberation and God's gift

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 277–78.

of liberation at the end of all historical struggles, Black Theology of Liberation argues that earthly and historical progress in the social sphere, to the extent that it contributes towards the moulding and ordering of the world into one of justice and peace, is necessarily of vital importance to the growth of the Kingdom whose final realization will be brought about by God in the eschaton.³⁴

Achievements in social liberation are provisional in kingdom terms. They can not be unconditionally identified with the kingdom of God but nor are they entirely unrelated to it. Therefore, while there is kingdom content to such historical events, they remain provisional in the sense that they point us beyond themselves towards the fullness of the kingdom which is not yet here.

To ascribe this kind of provisionality to the kingdom content in social and political transformation is not to render it less significant. For there is an important sense in which all of our experience of God's salvation has a provisional character. It is of *all* that the Holy Spirit does in salvation that Hendrikus Berkhof writes,

These are only starts, only "a small beginning" (Heidelberg Catechism). Though his work in individuals, churches, and cultures is powerful, it is also fragmentary and continually frustrated by human resistance. These works are defenselessly handed over to depreciation and even denial. Those who themselves share in the participation event experience his activity, yet precisely they experience how much the Spirit is *provisional*. Whatever he does is a guarantee but at the same time a postponement of the consummation.³⁵

To say therefore that social and political action is *provisionally* representative of the kingdom of God is not to say that it is inconsequential or peripheral to the church's witness. For the whole of the church's life presently has a provisional character. Even the trinitarian understanding of God, around which the life of the church revolves, is guided, Alasdair Heron writes, by "theological opinions and judgements of an essentially *provisional* character."³⁶ The nature of history ensures that there is ambiguity and ambivalence about all that occurs. Nothing is final. The point of the Christian faith is that

³⁴ S. Maimela, "Current Themes and Emphases in Black Theology", in I.J. Mosala & B. Tihagale eds., *The Unquestionable Right to be Free*, (New York: Orbis, 1986), p. 112.

³⁵ H. Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 334, my italics.

³⁶ A.I.C. Heron, *The Holy Spirit*, (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1983), p. 171, my italics.

God has engaged himself with our history. His saving action therefore is marked by a provisional character whether we consider it at an individual, ecclesial or social level. To ascribe provisionality to the kingdom value of initiatives in social and political transformation is not to render them dispensable to the integrity of the church's witness. Provisional though they are, such movements can be endowed with eschatological permanence. The Christian hope is for the transformation of this world, not its replacement with another.³⁷ Christians therefore have the confidence that whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – the glory and the honour of the nations – will be brought into the everlasting city of God.³⁸ There is continuity between the results of our social and cultural work and the eschatological future. Provisional, partial, penultimate these may be, still they have a place in the kingdom of God to which the future belongs.³⁹ The question remains, however, of how to detect and understand the points of convergence between the kingdom of God and contemporary history.

Moments of Truth

Given the penultimate and provisional character of God's liberative action in history in relation to the eschatological kingdom of God, it is apparent that there is a dialectical relationship between current liberative events and the coming of God's kingdom. Neither are they synonymous nor are they entirely distinct from one another. Within this dialectic the two, at times, become so closely identified that the challenge of the kingdom is manifested as a concrete historical choice. In that case, a *kairos*, a moment of truth, has arrived. The week of 8–13 March 1992 in Malawi provides a classic example of such a case. Not only did the Pastoral Letter's word of judgement and the call to repentance reach to the heart of Malawian society but, still more strikingly, the "trial" of the Catholic Bishops at the Malawi

³⁷ See J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, (London: SCM, 1967), pp. 288–91 *et passim*.

³⁸ Philippians 4:8, Revelation 21:26.

³⁹ For a helpful discussion of this point see M. Volf, "On Loving with Hope: Eschatology and Social Responsibility", *Transformation*, Vol. 7 No. 3 (July/September 1990), pp. 28–31.

Congress Party Emergency Convention "became identified" with the trial of Christ before Pontius Pilate.⁴⁰ The same juxtaposition of the judge and the accused occurred so that the trial functioned as a condemnation of the MCP and a vindication of the Bishops.⁴¹ Everyone in the country was then faced with the crisis of decision as to how to respond to this sudden and definitive reversal. Though still penultimate and provisional, one's decision at this point was clearly very closely related to the final decision regarding the kingdom of God. It is crucial to the integrity of the church that it makes the right decision at such points. To take a concrete option is risky and the church may hesitate but, as Bonhoeffer wrote, "Not to act and not to take a stand, simply for fear of making a mistake seems to me almost a contradiction of love."⁴² Similarly, from a Roman Catholic perspective Karl Rahner wrote that, "The church can be wide of the mark in such imperatives and directives, and more palpably than in theoretical declarations. But this is a risk that must be taken if the church is not to seem to be pedantic, to be living in a world of pure theory, remote from life, making pronouncements that do not touch the stubborn concreteness of real life."⁴³ Penultimate, provisional, risky though the decision may be, it is nevertheless definitive for the church's witness at that point. To fail to grasp the nettle and take a particular option is to abdicate from the responsibility of witnessing to the kingdom of God.

There is therefore no escaping social engagement and the decision as to what is the Word of God in a given concrete situation. John de Gruchy has brought this out clearly in his study of the Reformed tradition:

Calvin perceived, in continuity with Augustine in the fifth century, that just as human sin creates conflict within the world, tearing its social fabric apart, so the gospel, in seeking

⁴⁰ Records of the MCP Emergency Convention at which a plan to kill the Bishops was discussed have been circulated widely both inside and outside Malawi. See, e.g., *The Nation*, Vol. 1 Nos. 12-21 (2 Sept.-4 Oct. 1993).

⁴¹ This event is referred to again and again in the newly emergent independent press in Malawi as the decisive and definitive point in modern Malawian history. See, *inter alia*, *The Herald*, Vol. 1 No. 5 (8 March 1994).

⁴² D. Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI, (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1974), p. 350; cit. C. Villa-Vicencio *Between Christ and Caesar*, (Cape Town: David Philip & Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. xxi-xxii.

⁴³ K. Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, (London: SPCK, 1974), p. 79.

its remedy, creates a ferment of transformation not only within the church but also within society. Prophetic responsibility is thus not avoiding conflict but participating in it in a way consonant with God's kingdom.⁴⁴

Nor may we expect that the conflict will be carried on as something external to the life of the church itself:

The struggle for liberation, justice and truth in the world is not simply a struggle between the church and the powers of the world beyond its boundaries, but a struggle within the life of the church itself – a struggle for the soul of the church that relates to the social struggles of the world. This is not clearly recognised in times of relative harmony and peace, but in times of social and political crisis it becomes intensely apparent.⁴⁵

Such times came to Malawi in 1992–93. The battle was waged not only *between* the churches and the repressive political system but *within* and *among* the churches themselves.

It is the sharp edge of conflict which shapes the identity of the church and it is the struggle within the church to be true to the gospel which is the means of bringing God's transformation to the world at large. When attempts to exercise a prophetic witness in contemporary life provoke sharp differences within the life of the church, this represents the transforming "ferment" of the gospel. Therefore it must be welcomed, however uncomfortable and disturbing it may be. The risks and the costs of engaging prophetically in social and political conflict are necessary to the integrity of the church's witness. The path of discipleship and the advance of the kingdom run through the events of history and there are "moments of truth" when the gap between the ultimate and the penultimate narrows and a particular historical option becomes very closely identified with the kingdom of God. Without faithfulness at this penultimate level the church will not be able to be an effective sign pointing to the ultimate realities which it is charged to proclaim to the world. The integrity of the church is then at stake in the decision which it takes. Often the decision-making process will involve painful division as was the case in Malawi, particularly through the refusal of the Presbyterian Nkhoma Synod to take part in the movement for political change.⁴⁶ This crisis of division and decision, judgement and repentance is the church's costly path to

⁴⁴ De Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, pp. 20–21.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 220.

⁴⁶ See Ross, "Not Catalyst But Ferment", pp. 5–6.

bring alienation to the surface and to work towards social reconciliation.

We must further note, however, that while the ultimate and the penultimate are drawn closer in moments of crisis, they are never *completely* identified. Always there is the further horizon. Even in the heat of the struggle and even at the height of "success", the church's focus is on the kingdom which remains beyond the contemporary situation. This is, in fact, the strength of the church's position. It operates, for the sake of the kingdom, in the arena of contemporary politics, but its vision is never bounded by that arena. Here is where the church's distinctive contribution can be made. It is critically, liberatively engaged with contemporary politics but without seeking power for itself or for its leaders. This gives it the potential to be a continuous ferment of transformation. As the Taiwanese theologian C.S. Song has written: "God's politics does not consist of attempts to seize power. What it aims at is the transformation of power. God's politics has to do with transformation of human politics. It does not seek to rule and dominate but rather to effect a repentance of power."⁴⁷ The further horizon, the kingdom which always remains beyond, is the source of such transformative political witness. It enables the church to be the disturbing, liberating force which turns things upside down, casting down the proud and exalting the humble, preaching the good news to the poor, binding up the broken-hearted, proclaiming freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners. This paper has attempted, by employing the concepts of penultimacy and provisionality, to offer a framework for understanding the relation of contemporary politics to the eschatological kingdom of God. In conclusion, however, I must concur with Jose Miguez Bonino that, in the last analysis, the problem is not noetic but, rather, empirical: "History, in relation to the Kingdom, is not a riddle to be solved but a mission to be fulfilled."⁴⁸ The question is: "How can we participate, act out, *produce* the quality of personal and corporate existence which has a future, which possesses eschatological reality, which concentrates the true history?"⁴⁹

⁴⁷ C.S. Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, 2nd ed., (New York: Orbis, 1990, 1st pub. 1979), p. 241.

⁴⁸ Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, p. 143.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

4. The Theology of Hope: A Missing Link in African Christianity?

Introduction: The Theology of Hope

A marked feature of recent theological thought has been the recovery and reapplication of the future-oriented eschatology of the New Testament which has come to be characterised as the "theology of hope." The book which blazed the trail for this movement of theological thought, and which will be used as the principal reference point in this essay, is Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* which was first published in 1964 (E.T. 1967). Moltmann argues that Christianity was from the beginning an eschatological faith, directed by the resurrection of Jesus to the future of God which is yet to be fulfilled. His argument is informed and guided by two main sources:

1. The first source is modern biblical study. Since the work of Albert Schweitzer and Johannes Weiss at the turn of the century it has been widely accepted among biblical critics that the message both of Jesus and of the early church had a pronounced apocalyptic character. However, whereas such critical scholars as Bultmann and Dodd considered that the future eschatology of the New Testament could appear to "modern man" only as an incredible mythology, Moltmann "saw in future eschatology precisely the way to make Christian faith credible and relevant to the modern world."¹
2. The fact that Moltmann was able to do this owes a good deal to his second major source: the philosophy of Ernst Bloch, in particular his book *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1959). The keynote of Bloch's thought is that openness to the future is a vital constituent and basic dynamic in human life. As Richard Bauckham has summarised this philosophy "To be human is to have a utopia ahead, to be always on the move towards something else, to live in dreams and fantasies of the future, to be always striving for a desirable future. To be human is to hope."²

¹ R. Bauckham, "Moltmann's Theology of Hope Revisited", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 42 No. 2 (1989), p. 200.

² As summarized by R. Bauckham, *Moltmann: Messianic Theology in the Making*, (Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1987), p. 10.

For Bloch this utopian orientation functions not as an escapist dream but rather as a critical, motivating perspective on the present, revealing its inadequacies and opening up new possibilities.

Moltmann is much indebted to Bloch's philosophy of hope but differs from his former Tübingen colleague in finding the basis and content of hope in God's promise and action in the world, particularly through the resurrection of Jesus. Here lies the heart of Moltmann's theology of hope: the resurrection of Jesus understood as an event of eschatological promise. By this he means that the revelation of God in the resurrection of Christ is unfinished in the sense that it is related to a reality which is not here yet. The raising of Jesus is an event of promise, confirming and guaranteeing what is to come yet leaving it still in the future: "It is still outstanding, has not yet come about, has not yet appeared, but is promised and guaranteed in his resurrection, and indeed is given along with his resurrection as a necessary consequence in the end of death and a new creation in which amid the life and righteousness of all things God is all in all."³ In this way the promise contradicts existing reality and hope embraces the vision of a transformed world. This has been called "dialectical" eschatology and it rests on a dialectical Christology. Moltmann is much preoccupied with the absolute contrast, indeed contradiction, between the cross and the resurrection. He finds in the two events total opposites: death and life, the absence of God and the nearness of God, Godforsakenness and the glory of God. Yet it was *the same* Jesus who was crucified and is now raised. This for Moltmann is the point:

The 'vital point' for a Christian view of revelation accordingly lies in the fact that in all the qualitative difference of cross and resurrection Jesus is the same. This identity in infinite contradiction is theologically understood as an event of identification, an act of the faithfulness of God. It is this that forms the ground of the promise of the still outstanding future of Jesus Christ. It is this that is the ground of the hope which carries faith through the trials of the god-forsaken world and of death.⁴

It is this hopeful openness to the still outstanding future of the risen Lord which creates in the Church a persistent dissatisfaction with the present order and a missionary commitment to the transformation of

³ J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, (London: SCM, 1967) p. 88.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 85.

the world in the direction of the promised future. Here the theology of hope is full of practical application with regard to Christian mission and ethics where it is distinguished by its insistence that, just as it is the same Jesus who was crucified and raised, so God's promise is not for another world, but for the new creation of this world. The intention of this essay is to indicate some of the key features of this resurrection-based eschatological theology and to attempt to relate these insights to the African situation. When we refer to "African Christianity" we are thinking of a faith/life which is in the ongoing process of formation through the cross-fertilization of historic Christianity and African culture. We are not primarily concerned with the formal statements of faith of the churches but with the more elusive, but in some ways more significant, matter of the actual belief, outlook and practice of African Christians.

Theological Method: From the Particular to the General

In addressing the fundamental question of theological method Moltmann is emphatic that the starting-point must be the unique events of the biblical revelation and that theology must move *from* these *to* the universal significance of this revelation for all people and all reality

The path leads from the *concretum* to the *concretum universale*, not the other way round. Christian theology has to think along *this* line. It is not that a general truth becomes concrete in Jesus, but the concrete, unique, historic event of the crucifying and raising of Jesus by Yahweh, the God of promise who creates out of nothing, becomes general through the universal eschatological horizon it anticipates.⁵

It is a mistake therefore to begin with general ideas about God, "natural theology", and to seek to interpret the biblical material in the light of these universally accepted axioms. To do this is to allow alien concepts to control the meaning of the biblical revelation and will invariably have a distorting effect. What will suffer particularly will be the eschatological character of the biblical revelation because this method "requires the revelation to correspond to general ideas derived

⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 141-2.

from what reality is like now, instead of allowing the revelation to open up the prospect of a different future of transformed reality."⁶

The primary target of Moltmann's concern here is the tendency in Christian theology from patristic times to interpret the distinctive data of the Bible in the light of the general idea of God in Greek metaphysics. The result of this has been the identification of the Father of Jesus Christ with the one God of Greek metaphysics so that the attributes of the God of the Greeks, such as immutability or impassibility, have been uncritically ascribed to the God who is revealed in Christ. Moltmann has developed this concern further in an exposition of the *theologia crucis* in his subsequent major work *The Crucified God*:

The time has finally come for differentiating the Father of Jesus Christ from the God of the pagans and philosophers in the interest of Christian faith.... Christian faith is not 'radical monotheism'. As a theology of the cross, Christian theology is the criticism of and liberation from philosophical and political monotheism. God cannot suffer, God cannot die, says theism, in order to bring suffering, mortal being under his protection. God suffered in the suffering of Jesus, God died on the cross of Christ, says Christian faith, so that we might live and rise again in his future.⁷

Moltmann's concern is that Christian theology has been so constricted by the imposition of alien ideals that the proper character of the biblical revelation has been hidden from view and has not had its full criticising and reforming effect.

The question to be raised here is whether the same concern does not need to be applied *mutatis mutandis* to African ideas of God. In post-Independence Africa there has been a reaction against the earlier tendency to posit a radical discontinuity between African traditional religion and biblical revelation and growing interest in the continuity between what is known of God through Christianity and what was known of him in the previous African tradition.⁸ As Samuel Kibicho,

⁶ Bauckham, *Messianic Theology in the Making*, p. 25.

⁷ J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, (London: SCM, 1974), pp. 215–16.

⁸ This new direction is well-illustrated by the statement of the consultation of African theologians held at Ibadan in 1965: "We believe that the God and Father of our Lord

e.g., has written: "What we actually have is a radical continuity of African Traditional Religion, particularly of the African conception of God, even into and through Christianity."⁹ The result of this reforming movement, according to Kwame Bediako, is that "African theology has overturned virtually every negative verdict passed on African tradition by the ethnocentric perspective of the earlier Western missionary estimate of Africa,"¹⁰ This recovery of confidence in the traditional African conception of God may be welcomed as necessary and valuable, yet equally it may be exposed to new dangers. The point here is that Moltmann has shown how harmful it can be in Christian theology to move from the general to the particular instead of vice versa. If the controlling centre of African theology were to shift away from the data of biblical revelation towards general traditional ideas about God, then the question arises whether the integrity of the faith may suffer as a result.

That such a shift has already begun to occur may be indicated by the statement of Gabriel Setiloane that "Christianization of the African understanding of the Supreme Deity has been a devaluation or diminution of the African concept."¹¹ While the recovery of confidence in the African tradition may have much to offer for the enrichment of contemporary Christian faith, it must be asked whether the kind of reversal suggested by Setiloane does not lead to the approach from general to the particular which Moltmann has found to be so disastrous for the integrity of Christian theology. The danger is that the Christian faith could be surrendered to a syncretistic cultural

Jesus Christ, Creator of heaven and earth, Lord of history, has been dealing with mankind at all times and in all parts of the world. It is with this conviction that we study the rich history of our African peoples, and we have evidence that they know of Him and worship Him. We recognise the radical quality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ; and yet it is because of this revelation we can discern what is truly of God in our pre-Christian heritage: this knowledge of God is not totally discontinuous with our people's previous traditional knowledge of Him." K.A. Dickson and P. Ellingworth, *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), p. 16.

⁹ S.G. Kibicho, "The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: a Kikuyu case-study", E. Fashiole-Luke *et al.*, ed., *Christianity in Independent Africa*, (London: Rex Collings, 1978), pp. 372-3.

¹⁰ K. Bediako, "African Christian Theology", S.B. Ferguson & D.F. Wright, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology*, (Leicester: IVP, 1988), p. 10.

¹¹ G.M. Setiloane, "Where Are We in African Theology?" K. Appiah-Kubi & S. Torres, eds., *African Theology En Route*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1979), p. 63.

captivity where its proper character is lost to view. Among those who have pioneered the immense task of developing an "African Theology" during the last twenty years or so, such as Bolaji Idowu and Kwesi Dickson, there is a tendency to dismiss the determination of historic Christian theology to maintain the qualitative distinctiveness of the biblical revelation as simply a basic failure to understand and appreciate other religions. Karl Barth has been a particular target of their criticism in this respect.¹² While their essential thesis that there is a genuine revelation of the character and purpose of God in African traditional religion may be an important and valuable one, nevertheless where that is made the starting-point for theological reflection there occurs the kind of reversal of the particular and the general which Moltmann has shown to be so dangerous. If we examine Dickson's attempt to write an African theology of the cross, for example, we find that he takes as his starting point death as understood in the African tradition.¹³ The danger we would expect here would be the elimination of the eschatological orientation since African thought seems to have little or no sense of the future. So it is no surprise to find that Dickson interprets Christ's death with reference to the present community (the present) and the "Living-dead" (the past) but with no reference whatever to the future.¹⁴ As Moltmann would have predicted, it is the eschatological character of the faith which is lost to view when this reversal of the "particular-to-general" methodology is allowed to take place. In our concern to engage in profound and serious dialogue with the African tradition we have to beware lest we fall into a whole theological methodology which is inappropriate to the character of the biblical revelation.

Epiphany Religions and a Religion of Promise

Another basic theme in *Theology of Hope* is the contrast, which Moltmann finds in the Old Testament and applies universally, between "epiphany religions" and the biblical religion of promise.

¹² See, e.g., E.B. Idowu, "Introduction", K.A. Dickson & P. Ellingworth, *op cit*, pp. 10-11; and K.A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984), pp. 29-46.

¹³ Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, pp. 192-99.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 196-98.

Epiphany religions are identified by their anti-historical character. They find the meaning of life not in historical change but in contact with changeless eternity. The divinity is understood to become epiphanous either directly or through intermediate authorities and generally through a well-ordered cultus. The purpose of these epiphanies is never to challenge or change the present order but rather "where they come about, there comes the hallowing of place, of time and men in that act in which man's ever-threatened culture is granted correspondence with, and participation in the eternal divine cosmos."¹⁵ The nature religions of Canaan are taken as the archetype of epiphany religion and Moltmann points out how distinct in its religious environment was the Old Testament religion of promise. When Yahweh appears the point of his appearance is found in the promise which directs attention away from the present time and place and towards the future. This is in marked contrast to the epiphany religions:

Here Yahweh's revelation manifestly does serve to bring the ever-threatened present into congruence with his eternity. On the contrary, its effect is that the hearers of the promise become incongruous with the reality around them, as they strike out in hope towards the promised new future. The result is not the religious sanctioning of the present, but a break-away towards the future."¹⁶

Moltmann uses this Old Testament contrast and tension as a key to understanding conflicting views of revelation and eschatology within Christian theology. Where he finds revelation and eschatology interpreted with reference to the eternal in the present, rather than with reference to the temporal future, he identifies the equivalent of an epiphany religion.

When this typology is applied to African Traditional Religion it clearly does not fall into the category of a religion of promise since the crucial themes of promise, the future and eschatology are almost completely lacking. In fact, ATR appears to be much closer to epiphany religion since the basic drive is to make contact with a changeless eternity and to obtain religious sanction for the present order. The prominence of the spirit world in the traditional African consciousness ensures that the fundamental religious concern is with

¹⁵ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 99.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

an unchanging other-worldly reality rather than with the historical future of this world. The world of the spirits is understood to interpenetrate the human world and to affect human life and behaviour at many points. However, it does not lie in the future in any way which would allow us to apply the category of promise. Rather it appears as an immense background to our immediate experience of reality into which at death we will be absorbed and where, finally, after there is no living person left who can remember us, our life and personality will be extinguished. As John Mbiti has written, "For many African peoples as far as evidence is available, the Eschatology of man takes him back to the remotest possible point in Time beyond his point of beginning to, in reality, a point of non-being.... There is no teleology in African Eschatology; what there is might be called 'deteriology'"¹⁷ Since the concept of divine promise opening up an eschatological horizon, the basic dynamic of biblical religion, is foreign to the African tradition we might expect that Christianity in Africa would have difficulty in fully accommodating it. A much easier option would be to adapt Christianity to the epiphany type of religion by collapsing the dimension of future eschatology into a conception of the eternal in the present. How far this option has been taken is a question to be considered in the next section.

Eschatology, History and Faith

Should African Christianity fail to take full account of the dimension of the future, then from the perspective of the theology of hope it will be seriously deficient. For to know the risen Christ, Moltmann argues, is to be oriented to his future:

The Easter appearances of the crucified Christ are a constant incitement to the consciousness that hopes and anticipates, but on the other hand also suffers and is critical of existence. For these 'appearances' make visible something of the eschatological future of the Christ event, and therefore cause us to seek and to search for the future revelation of this event. Thus knowledge becomes anticipatory, provisional and fragmentary knowledge of his future, namely, of what he will be.¹⁸

¹⁷ J.S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, (London: SPCK, 1978), 1st pub. 1971, p. 139.

¹⁸ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 203.

The implications of this are brought out by Moltmann in a later essay where he points out that in Revelation 1:4 the future of God is not spoken of by use of the verb *einai* (to be) which we might expect, but instead we find the future *erchesthai* (to come):

This is decisive. God's future is not that he will be as he is and was, but that he comes. The future is, therefore, not a dimension of his eternity, but is his own movement in which he comes to us. This gives the future of God a preeminence over his past and his present in history. His actions in history in the past and the present are aimed at his coming and attain their significance from his future. Who God in himself is will be revealed then. We know about God here only in an historically provisional way.¹⁹

In this case Christian faith must be defined as a knowledge in hope which is prospective and anticipatory but "therefore also provisional, fragmentary, open, straining beyond itself. It knows the future in striving to bring out the tendencies and latencies of the Christ event of the crucifixion and resurrection, and in seeking to estimate the possibilities opened up by this event."²⁰

This openness to the future operates also to open theology to the world and especially to history. Since the world is now viewed in the light of the coming future of God, everything in it is called in question. It is not yet what it has the prospect of being. "When the world and human nature bound up with it are called in question in this way, then they become 'historic', for they are staked upon, and submitted to the crisis of, the promised future."²¹ Eschatology is not then a negation of history or an escape from history. On the contrary, it is the eschatological orientation which properly establishes history: "The promise which announces the *eschaton*, and in which the *eschaton* announces itself, is the motive power, the mainspring, the driving force and the torture of history."²² In this way not only is history established in its own proper integrity but the believer becomes actively engaged in the historical process. The eschatological promise gives him a critical distance from his present

19 J. Moltmann, *The Experiment Hope*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 51–52.

20 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 203.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 164.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

so that he can recognise its deficiencies and work to transform the present in the direction of the promised future.

This openness to the future and resultant historic character of faith are again not very congenial to the African tradition. In fact, the very idea of time proceeding in a linear manner into the future is quite strange. As John Mbiti has written: "According to traditional concepts time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long *past*, a *present* and virtually *no future*.... *Actual time* is therefore what is present and what is past. It moves 'backward' rather than 'forward'; and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly on what has taken place."²³ Mbiti uses two Swahili words to indicate the African conception of time. *Sasa* is the period of immediate concern, having the sense of nearness and "now-ness". *Zamani* is the deeper time into which all *Sasa* finally feeds and disappears: "*Zamani* is the graveyard of time, the period of termination, the dimension in which everything finds its halting point. It is the final storehouse for all phenomena and events, the ocean of time in which everything becomes absorbed into a reality that is neither after nor before."²⁴ This conceptuality of time allows for neither history nor eschatology: "In traditional African thought there is no concept of history moving 'forward' towards a future climax or towards the end of the world."²⁵ This was the mentality to which the Christian message has been addressed in Africa and it must be acknowledged that the missionary message has generally done little to challenge the African perception that faith finds its focal point in a spiritual world identifiable with *Zamani*.

This may be attributed to two somewhat contrary tendencies, both of which militate against any proper appreciation of the theology of hope. On the one hand, in a large section of modern Western Christianity future-oriented eschatology is regarded as an irrelevance. Where the future is mentioned it is in a manner which would, wrote Barth, "lull us comfortably to sleep by adding at the conclusion of Christian Dogmatics a short and perfectly harmless chapter entitled – 'Eschatology'."²⁶ At the opposite extreme is the kind of eschatology which Mbiti found being taught among the Akamba people by the

²³ J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁶ K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (London: 1933), p. 500.

Africa Inland Mission where the emphasis is exclusively other-worldly.²⁷ Here all the eschatological drive of the Christian faith has been directed towards a paradise which has no direct connection with the future of this world. Mbiti points out that the discovery of the future dimension of time among African Christians "seems to create a strong expectation of the millennium. This makes many Christians escape from facing the challenges of this life into the state of merely hoping and waiting for the life of paradise."²⁸ This is borne out by the survey of preaching in mainstream Malawian churches outlined below²⁹, which suggests that the message being generally preached is one which presents an extra-historical focus for hope. There is much interest in entering paradise but this is perceived not as a goal towards which history is advancing but rather as a spiritual world which is beyond the present reality, a kind of celestial *Zamani*. Similarly, in the South African context, Villa-Vicencio has noted that many Christians understand their faith as "an escape from this life by means of an ethereal brand of religion."³⁰ Such an outlook closes the door on the openness to the future, to the God who will come, and to history as the process directed towards that goal, for which the theology of hope has been urgently calling.

From Promise to Mission

Where the theology of hope finds its practical outworking is in the movement from *promissio* (promise) to *missio* (mission):

The *promissio* of the universal future leads of necessity to the universal *missio* of the Church to all nations. The promise of divine righteousness in the event of the justification of the godless leads immediately to the hunger for divine right in the godless world, and thus to the struggle for public, bodily obedience. The promise of the resurrection of the dead leads at

²⁷ Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology*, *passim*.

²⁸ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 28.

²⁹ See below pp. 81–105.

³⁰ C. Villa-Vicencio, "Introduction: Reclaiming the Christian Heritage", C. Villa-Vicencio, ed., *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 2.

once to love for the true life of the whole imperilled and impaired creation.³¹

Far from operating as an escape-route from this world eschatology here arouses a radical and transformatory commitment to the present order:

The parousia of Christ is a different thing from a reality that is experienced now and given now. As compared with what can now be experienced, it brings something new. Yet it is not for that reason totally separate from the reality which we can now experience and have now to live in, as the future that is really outstanding, it works upon the present by awaking hopes and establishing resistance.³²

The way this dynamic operates, according to Moltmann, is that since what is promised does not correspond with present reality, when we grasp the promise in faith and hope it sets us in critical opposition to the existing reality. It sets up an incongruence between what the future will be and what is now the case, in a way which makes us creatively critical of life as we find it at present. As Moltmann puts it, "This hope makes the Christian Church a constant disturbance in human society, seeking as the latter does to stabilize itself into a 'continuing city'. It makes the Church the source of continual new impulses towards the realization of righteousness, freedom and humanity here in the light of the promised future that is to come."³³ Impulses of this creative order can arise only where hope in the promised future generates confidence in this world. The believer is confident that the world can be changed and will be changed by the God of his hope and this confidence operates as an incentive and a motivation to work for the transformation of the present state of affairs.

A strong emphasis of Moltmann at this point is that our hope is directed not to another world but rather to the transformation of this world. Knowledge of God is not knowledge which draws us upwards but rather onwards. Moltmann is most concerned to distinguish authentic Christian hope from the other-worldly eschatology which projects hope entirely into another world and is resigned to the unalterability of affairs in this world: "There has been running

³¹ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 225.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

through the actual history of the Christian Church a constant struggle between a religious faith in the beyond, which leaves this world to its own devices, and a hope for the future, which accepts responsibility for transforming this world."³⁴ For Moltmann the *eschaton* upon which our hopes are set is God's recreation of *this world* which is vouchsafed to us in the raising of Jesus from the dead. In the light of this eschatological hope the world is seen as transformable in the direction of the promised future and believers in the promise are involved in seeking and activating the present possibilities of world history which lead in the direction of the eschatological future. The Christian mission which thus arises is a comprehensive one. Salvation, *soteria*, must also be understood as *shalom* in the Old Testament sense. "This does not mean merely salvation of the soul, individual rescue from the evil world, comfort for the troubled conscience, but also the realization of the eschatological *hope of justice*, the *humanizing* of man, the *socializing* of humanity, *peace* for all creation."³⁵ In this way Moltmann sees the hope-inspired mission as addressing not only the matter of personal salvation but also the shaping of public, social and political life. Christian hope is then, for Moltmann, the motivating force for the Church's missionary engagement with the world and especially for Christian involvement in the processes of social and political change. As Bauckham writes, "By opening the church to the eschatological future Christian hope also opened the church to the world, casting the church in the role of an agent of eschatological unrest in society, whose task is to keep the world on the move towards the coming kingdom of God."³⁶

A final point is that the eschatological horizon not only grounds and informs the Christian missionary commitment to this world but also gives the necessary assurance that our self-expenditure in this work is meaningful. "The expectation of the promised future of the kingdom of God which is coming to man and the world to set them right and create life, makes us ready to expend ourselves unrestrainedly and unreservedly in love and in the work of the reconciliation of the world

³⁴ J. Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1969), p. 136.

³⁵ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 329.

³⁶ Bauckham, art. cit., p. 200.

with God and his future."³⁷ The *Theology of Hope* ends with a very practical prescription for the hopeful perspective which sustains Christian mission :

The world is not yet finished, but is understood as engaged in a history. It is therefore the world of possibilities, the world in which we can serve the future, promised truth and righteousness and peace. This is an age of diaspora, of sowing in hope, of self-surrender and sacrifice, for it is an age which stands within the horizon of a new future. Thus self-expenditure in this world, day-to-day love in hope, becomes possible and becomes human within that horizon of expectation which transcends this world.³⁸

In this way the theology of hope not only demands missionary engagement with the world but gives the inner motivation to sustain it.

It is at this point that it may be most apparent that the theology of hope is a missing link in African Christianity. For in the Church in Africa there appears to be a lack of a sense of mission, a lack of confidence that *this world* may be transformed, a lack of drive to set about effecting that transformation, all of which may be attributed, at least in part, to the lack of a well-developed horizon of eschatological hope. One notable feature in the survey of preaching was the lack of reference to mission or to the transformation of this world. The almost uniform focus of hope was on an other-worldly paradise for which we must individually be prepared. The emphasis in the message has been on self-examination and personal sanctity with a marked moralistic tendency. Similarly, in his study of the Africa Inland Mission churches among the Akamba, Mbiti finds that the eschatological preoccupation is with individual entry to heaven and escape from this world.³⁹ These samples suggest that African Christianity may be concerned with *soteria* at the expense of *shalom*. This would indicate an imbalance which requires to be corrected, particularly if we accept Adrian Hastings' assessment that the crucial issue in Africa today is no longer that of gospel and culture but rather that of gospel and justice.⁴⁰ It may be significant that in South Africa,

³⁷ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 337.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

³⁹ Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology*, pp. 51–61.

⁴⁰ A. Hastings, *African Catholicism: Essays in Discovery*, (London: SCM, 1989), p. 35.

where questions of social justice have demanded the urgent attention of the church, theologians such as Manas Buthelezi have given serious attention to the theology of hope,⁴¹ and a major thrust of "Black Theology" has been towards the achievement of historical change in the socio-political order. As Allan Boesak has written: "Black Theology realizes that New Testament eschatology is a call to arms, a summons not to be content with the existing situation of oppression, but to take sides with the oppressed and the poor and subsequently for the new humanity and the new world.... Christians can never acquiesce in the status quo, but they continually challenge the structures of society where they fall short of the fullness revealed in Christ."⁴² It may be that Africa as a whole lies in need of an awakening of this kind of eschatological theological awareness.

Conclusion

The theology of hope has provoked some major theological reassessment among Western Christians as they have sought to re-absorb an integral component of the biblical faith which had been allowed to fall into neglect. The argument of this study is that a recovery of the biblical orientation to the future may have much to contribute also to Christianity in Africa. While the ongoing task of integrating the Christian faith and the African tradition may be necessary and fruitful, it carries certain dangers. With regard to eschatology we have noted that when Christianity is approached and interpreted from the standpoint of ATR there is a tendency to miss the future hope which is anchored in this world and which leads to historical change. Instead, hope is directed outside history to a "celestial *Zamani*", a paradise quite unconnected with the history of this world. The result is that Christianity functions as "a religious faith in the beyond, which leaves this world to its own devices."⁴³ The Church in Africa therefore fails to be the world-transforming, nation-building, social renewing agency which it has the calling and potential to be.

⁴¹ See, e.g., M. Buthelezi, "Theological Grounds for an Ethic of Hope", B. Moore, ed., *The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), pp. 147-56.

⁴² A.A. Boesak, *Black Theology Black Power*, (London: Mowbrays, 1978), pp. 145-46.

The solution, in part at least, may be found in some of the suggestions of the theology of hope. While maintaining cultural sensitivity, there could be much to be gained in theological method firmly establishing the starting-point in the events of the biblical revelation and in moving always *from* the particular *to* the general. There is an urgent need for thoughtful exposition of the advent, death and resurrection of Christ, not through the imposition of alien categories, but in their own terms and according to their own intrinsic meaning. One result of this may be a new awareness of the extent and depth of God's engagement with, and redemption of, our space, time and history in and through Jesus Christ. Through his interaction with our world in the incarnation and resurrection and through the promise of the coming future of the risen Christ, God has staked his claim on all of our history. The future eschatological dimension of the resurrection, in fact, established history and convinces us that it is not in escape from this world but in engagement with this world that the fulfillment of our hope is to be found. Without any compromise of the ultimate object of our hope in the resurrection of the dead, we may take the hopefulness engendered by the raising of Jesus Christ to the business of transforming the world now in the direction of its promised future. Hope, then, may be the key to rescuing the African Church from an imbalanced "ethereal" form of religion and recovering the dynamic, reforming character of biblical faith.

⁴³ Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, p. 136.

5. Contemporary Preaching in Mainstream Christian Churches in Malawi: A Survey and Analysis

Introduction

The origins of the Presbyterian, Anglican and Roman Catholic churches in Malawi have been subject to a good deal of scholarly attention.¹ By contrast, their contemporary life and impact seem to have attracted little in the way of systematic study. Recent research has tended to concentrate on the African Independent or Indigenous churches to such an extent that the "mainstream" churches have been somewhat neglected.² As A.C. Ross remarked, in a recent review, "Little field work of the type done among 'independent' Christians has been done among the congregations of the 'historic' churches. If we are to begin to discern more clearly the development of African Christianity then this needs to be done".³ The present study attempts to make a beginning in this direction. It is a broad survey encompassing the three very different Malawian churches, Presbyterian, Anglican and Roman Catholic, which fall within the category of "mainstream" Each one of these would be worthy of study on its own but there may

¹ See, e.g., I. Linden, *Catholics, Peasants and Chewa Resistance in Nyasaland 1889–1939*, (London: Heinemann, 1974); K.J. McCracken, *Politics and Christianity in Malawi 1875–1940*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); A.C. Ross, "The Origins and Development of the Church of Scotland Mission, Blantyre, Nyasaland 1875–1926", (Ph.D., University of Edinburgh, 1968); R.G. Stuart, "Christianity and the Chewa: the Anglican Case 1885–1950", (Ph.D., University of London, 1974); T.J. Thompson, "Fraser and the Ngoni", (Ph.D., University of Edinburgh, 1980).

² See, e.g., J.C. Chakanza, "Towards an Interpretation of Independent Churches in Malawi", (*Africa Theological Journal*, 1982, 131–42), *New Religious Movements in Malawi: A Bibliographical Review*, (Zomba: University of Malawi, Sources for the Study of Religion in Malawi, No. 10), and "Religious Revitalization in Malawi: The African Ancestors' Religion", (*Journal of Humanities*, No. 3 (1989), 43–45); and H.B.P. Mijoga, *Biblical Exegesis in African Independent Churches in Malawi*, (Zomba: University of Malawi, Sources for the Study of Religion in Malawi, No. 14).

³ A.C. Ross, Review of M.L. Daneel, *Quest for Belonging*, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. XIX, Fasc. 2, June 1989).

Each one of these would be worthy of study on its own but there may also be some value in a comprehensive and comparative approach. The general objective of this study is to provide a survey and analysis of the message being preached and its effects in the life of the people. More specifically, five aims were set. 1. To ascertain what are the characteristic emphases of contemporary preaching in the mainstream churches and to assess what significance might lie in these. 2. To examine the interface between traditional African beliefs and Christianity as this affects both the content of the message and the nature of its reception. 3. To assess how far the mainstream churches are sensitive to the protest of the African Indigenous Churches: do they make any concessions or do they remain impervious? 4. To assess how far the Christian profession of the people is a matter of outward assent (*assensus*) and how far it is a matter of inward commitment (*fiducia*). 5. To consider how far the message of the mainstream churches is community-strengthening and nation-building or how far it is restricted to the sphere of private morality and spirituality. What follows is the result of pursuing these areas of inquiry.

A two-fold method was adopted in order to gather the necessary data. 1. A nationwide survey of sermons preached in mainstream churches was conducted over 1990–92. Students were employed as research assistants during vacations and produced successful reports on 587 sermons (259 Presbyterian, 248 Roman Catholic, and 80 Anglican). The content of these sermons has been analyzed and the results appear below. 2. Interviews, based on questionnaires, were conducted with both 228 preachers (99 Presbyterian, 89 Roman Catholic, and 40 Anglican) and 244 church members (102 Presbyterian, 102 Roman Catholic, and 40 Anglican). Again students were employed as research assistants and conducted the interviews in late 1991 and early 1992. The aim was to cover a representative sample of church membership by sending students to different parts of the country and instructing them to interview a variety of people – male and female, old and young, educated and illiterate. The interviews were conducted in the vernacular but the results were translated into English for the purposes of analysis. Most of this report is based on the analysis of the results of the interviews. The Anglican Church in Malawi is much smaller than either the Presbyterian or the Roman Catholic, each of which claims the allegiance of around one quarter of the population. In order to be comprehensive I included some Anglicans

in the research but not enough to form a representative sample for Anglicanism as a distinctive tradition. Therefore I have not used the Anglican statistics for representative or comparative purposes. On the other hand, I have made comparisons between the Roman Catholic and Presbyterian churches on the basis of interviews with 99 Presbyterian preachers and 89 Roman Catholic, and 102 Presbyterian members and 102 Roman Catholic. It should also be noted that the questionnaires included many "open" questions so that the answers do not fall into mutually exclusive categories but may involve more than one category. Much of the data consists of percentages of answers which fall into various categories but, in order to "put flesh" on the statistics, I have included some anecdotal evidence, drawing on the comments recorded during the interviews. It must be conceded at the outset that preaching is not a field which lends itself very readily to empirical research. The categorization being employed may often seem too crude and clumsy to make sense of the profound realities being addressed. The study would certainly be over-reaching itself if it pretended to offer a complete picture of Malawian preaching. What is intended, however, is simply a profile which may highlight some broad trends and thus suggest areas which merit further investigation.

Main Emphases in Mainstream Preaching

The primary means used to identify the main emphases in contemporary preaching was to find out which themes were most prominent among the 587 sermons surveyed. The research assistants were asked to identify which themes were "substantially treated" out of a suggested list of fifteen (see below). Almost all the sermons were substantially devoted to at least one of the suggested topics and often to more than one. So the 587 sermons were judged to have given substantial treatment to 988 themes. The research assistants were also required to give a brief outline of the main points of the sermon so that the accuracy of their categorization could be checked and, where necessary, corrected. The table below gives the percentage of sermons devoted to each theme, in descending order. The first column gives the percentage for all the sermons surveyed, the second for CCAP and the third for Roman Catholic.

THEME	ALL	CCAP	RC
Need for personal conversion	35	35	38
Duties of the Christian life	28	25	28
God's judgement	16	21	10
Christ's power to save/heal today	15	14	16
The life to come	14	12	18
Mission and evangelism	11	7	11
Christ's finished work	8	9	8
God's creation	8	9	8
Growth of Christian character	8	7	10
The Incarnation	6	5	8
The deity of Christ	4	4	5
Marriage and family life	3	2	4
Importance of the sacraments	3	1	6
The humanity of Christ	3	2	4
Social renewal	3	2	3

A number of observations may be made regarding the table.

1. It is apparent that it is the subjective rather than the objective pole of the Christian faith which predominates in the preaching. Well over half of the sermons dwelt substantially on either the need for personal conversion or the duties of the Christian life, such as prayer, charity, church attendance. By comparison the "objective" core of Christian faith in the incarnation, the deity and humanity of Christ is given relatively little attention. Reading the sermon outlines I noticed that the imperative mood was very much more common than the indicative.

2. Christianity appears to be presented as primarily a matter of personal faith and personal conduct. By comparison, little attention is devoted either to family life or to society as a whole. Many of the calls for personal conversion and Christian conduct were addressed to the problem of hypocrisy.

3. The balance of emphasis is remarkably similar when we compare the CCAP and Roman Catholic choice of themes. There are only two themes where a wide discrepancy appears. God's judgement was treated in 21% of CCAP sermons but only in 10% of Roman Catholic sermons. The importance of the sacraments was treated in 6% of Roman Catholic sermons but only 1% of CCAP sermons. The case of the sacraments is not surprising but the case of divine judgement may

be worth pondering. The most noteworthy point may be the closeness of Protestant and Catholic preaching, both in the themes emphasised and in those relatively neglected.

4. Reading the sermon outlines left me with the impression that, were it not for the Christmas and Easter seasons, there would be relatively little emphasis on Christ himself. It was not uncommon to read a sermon outline like this one from a CCAP congregation in the Central Region:

- (a) We have to thank God for all the things he has given us in the world.
- (b) God will punish all sinners and undeservers.
- (c) We should as much as possible always give to God offerings which are without blemishes.
- (d) Each and every person has to cross-examine himself to determine if he is presentable before God.
- (e) Christians should make sure that they remove all impending blocks that can lead to sin.

Creation, sin and redemption without reference to Christ!

The research assistants were also asked to identify the areas in which the preacher called for a response to his message. As with the themes listed above, in many cases the message was applied in more than one "area" so a total of 911 were identified in the 587 sermons. The figures for each "area" are given below in the form of a percentage of the total, with columns again for CCAP and Roman Catholic.

AREA	ALL	CCAP	RC
Personal faith and repentance	48	59	44
Living a good and moral life	33	29	39
Observance of Christian duties	28	29	29
Openness to the Spirit of God	13	13	12
Personal relationships in community	11	5	13
Life of church as fellowship	5	3	7
Marriage and family life	5	2	8
National life	2	1	3
Working life	2	1	4
Relating to the African tradition	1	0	1

Once again it is clear that the application of the message was concentrated at the personal level. Almost half of the sermons included a

call to personal faith and repentance, whereas relatively few sermons applied the message at the corporate level of the family, the church, the community or the nation. The figures strongly suggest that preachers call for response to their sermons in terms of personal piety and conduct. Little attention is given to the wider social context. It is revealing that only 4 sermons out of the 587 called for a response which related directly to the African tradition. The workplace received little attention, especially when it is noted that of the few sermons referring to working life most were stressing the point that Christians should not work on Sundays! We should notice, however, that the Roman Catholic percentages for application at the communal level are consistently higher than those of the CCAP. Conversely, the CCAP figure for personal faith and conversion is 15 percentage points higher than the Roman Catholic figure.

A point which could not be missed on reading the sermon outlines was the extent to which they are inspired by a commitment to expound the passage or passages of the Bible read at the service. The research assistants were required to assess how closely the sermon was related to the Bible reading. For all 587 sermons 88% were said to be very closely related, 7% to be slightly related, and 5% to be not at all related to the Bible reading. For the CCAP sermons, 91% were said to be very closely related, 6% to be slightly related, and 3% to be not at all related. For the Roman Catholic sermons, 88% were said to be very closely related, 6% to be slightly related, and 6% to be not at all related. This underlines the massive importance of the Bible for mainstream Christianity in Africa. Not only are the texts being read week after week in parishes throughout the country but a serious effort is being made to expound them. This survey has not sought to assess the quality of the Bible exposition but it has revealed that preaching, by and large, attempts to explain, amplify, illustrate and apply a given passage of scripture. In this respect the figures suggest that the Roman Catholic Church is almost as Bible-centred as the Presbyterian. The impact of Vatican II is clearly discernible at the level of grassroots preaching in Malawi!

The research assistants were required to note which passages of scripture were read during the service. In the case of the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches this exercise revealed little since both follow lectionaries. In the CCAP case, however, preachers are free to select texts of their choice. I have therefore tabulated the texts read in

CCAP services in order to see whether there is any particular trend in the preachers' choice of Bible passages. Below are listed the total occurrences, in order of frequency, of the books of the Old Testament and New Testament read in the 259 CCAP services.

Genesis	34	Matthew	48
Isaiah	23	John	36
Exodus	21	Luke	33
Psalms	17	Acts	25
Proverbs	11	Mark	22
Jeremiah	10	Romans	21
I Kings	9	Revelation	11
Deuteronomy	8	I Corinthians	9
II Kings	7	II Timothy	9
Ezekiel	6	James	8
Jonah	5	Ephesians	7
Joshua	5	II Corinthians	6
Malachi	4	Hebrews	5
Numbers	4	I John	5
I Samuel	4	Galatians	4
Leviticus	3	II Peter	4
Micah	3	Philippians	4
Daniel	2	I Timothy	4
Job	2	Colossians	2
Amos	1	I Peter	2
I Chronicles	1	Philemon	1
II Chronicles	1		
Habakkuk	1		
Hosea	1		
Judges	1		
Lamentations	1		
Nehemiah	1		
Obadiah	1		

There were no readings from the Old Testament books of Ruth, II Samuel, Ezra, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Joel, Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai and Zechariah; nor from the New Testament books of I and II Thessalonians, Titus, II and III John and Jude. The figures represent a well-balanced coverage of the Bible. 38% of services had readings from the Pentateuch and historical books, 11% from the Psalms and wisdom literature, 22% from the prophets, 55% from the Gospels and 48% from the Acts and epistles. There is little

sign of partiality in the selection of passages. We might notice that Proverbs is the fifth most common Old Testament book to be chosen, perhaps reflecting an African affinity for that form of literature. It may also be of some significance that "practical" James and "moralistic" II Timothy were more commonly chosen than the more doctrinal Ephesians and Colossians. However, the most impressive feature of the results is the broadness of the range of scripture which is read and expounded.

Another approach to ascertaining the main emphases of contemporary preaching was taken through the questions asked in the interviews with members. The first question was aimed to reveal something about the general impression left by the church's preaching: "Which do you hear more often in the church's preaching – messages of celebration and joy or of warning and duty"? 28% of interviewees chose celebration and joy, 72% warning and duty. The corresponding figures for Roman Catholics were 32% and 68%, for CCAP 28% and 72%. The proportion opting for celebration and joy was higher than expected. The second question was, "What temptations or dangers does the church warn against most often?" There was no limit to the answers which could be given but the great majority fitted the ten categories listed below. For each category there is listed the percentage of interviewees who selected it, with percentage figures also for CCAP and Roman Catholic. Most respondents gave answers which included a number of categories.

CATEGORY	ALL	CCAP	RC
Adultery/promiscuity	79	83	76
Stealing	41	44	38
Hatred	37	50	29
Drunkenness	31	41	18
Pride/jealousy	21	21	14
Lying	14	18	13
Unbelief	12	9	11
Witchcraft	9	12	5
Materialism	6	8	0
Worldliness	2	3	0

The most striking feature of the table is the fact that adultery/promiscuity is the only temptation or danger mentioned by a large majority of interviewees. The predominance of this issue is supported by much anecdotal evidence from the interviews, i.e. com-

ments such as "sex when you are not married means committing the great sin." However, later in the questionnaire, interviewees were asked, "Does the preaching of the church help young people to control their sexual behaviour? 49% answered unequivocally "yes", 38% answered "no", and 13% were uncertain. For CCAP the equivalent figures are 63%, 22% and 15%. For Roman Catholics they are 26%, 65% and 9%. This raises a serious question for Malawian preaching. Given that such prominence is given to warning against adultery and promiscuity, it is remarkable that less than half of the church members interviewed are confident that the preaching helps young people to control their sexual behaviour. It is particularly striking that in the Catholic case barely a quarter have such confidence. The question raised is that of the practical effect of the teaching. How much does the message which is preached effectively guide the people in their life and conduct. If it has relatively little impact in an area of such importance as sexual behaviour, one wonders how seriously it is taken. Some of the replies were very blunt, e.g. "young people do not listen to the church's preaching." "Not as expected as compared to the effort the church is putting on this issue – many young people are lost on sexual behaviour." "To face facts the church is trying its best but it is these young people who are a problem. They don't adhere to the preaching." I also suspect that many of those who answered in the affirmative meant simply that they hoped so! There is a serious question here, not only of Christian faith and sexual morality, but of how far the message of the church's preaching is received in a way which significantly influences people's motivation and behaviour.

The greatest discrepancy between CCAP and Roman Catholic was in the area of drunkenness which owes its high place in the table to the frequency with which it was mentioned among CCAP members. I also included a question to members which sought to identify the positive demands most commonly made in preaching: "What are the most important rules or laws for a Christian to follow?" Most answers to this question were too general to be amenable to meaningful categorization. Often "love God" and/or "love your neighbour" was all that was given. It seems that the temptations and dangers are more clearly defined than the virtues and positive values inculcated in preaching. In the preachers' questionnaire I began with, "What are the most important virtues in the Christian life which you seek to encourage in your preaching?" Again, attempts meaningfully to categorize the answers failed. On the other hand, for the question, "What

are the greatest dangers to the life of a Christian which you warn against in your preaching?", I was able to use the same categorization as for the similar question to the members. The results can therefore be compared. Listed below are the percentages for the answers of the preachers. Again, respondents were free to include a number of categories in their answers.

CATEGORY	ALL	CCAP	RC
Adultery/promiscuity	66	78	62
Drunkenness	43	55	33
Unbelief	29	18	32
Stealing	27	31	27
Hatred	23	31	18
Pride/jealousy	22	32	13
Worldliness	12	8	5
Materialism	10	9	3
Witchcraft	8	13	3
Lying	6	7	3

When we compare the figures for the preachers with those of the members there is a broad similarity which suggests that the intention of the preachers and the actual reception of their message are not too far apart from one another. Once again adultery/promiscuity is by far the most commonly mentioned danger to the Christian. Not committing adultery and not getting drunk clearly figure prominently in the profile for the Christian life which is presented from the pulpit. There are some areas where the preachers appear to lay greater emphasis than is perceived by the members. We should notice drunkenness (Preachers 43; Members 31), unbelief (Preachers 29; Members 12), and worldliness (Preachers 12, Members 2). On the other hand there are some dangers which figure higher in the consciousness of the members than they do in that of the preachers. Note may be taken of stealing (Members 41; Preachers 27), hatred (Members 37; Preachers 23), and lying (Members 14, Preachers 6). There is also the intriguing fact that no Roman Catholic members mentioned any danger in the category of materialism or worldliness, though their preachers claimed to lay at least some emphasis on these areas (worldliness 5 and materialism 3).

Christian Faith and African Beliefs

Given the profound engagement of Christian faith and African culture which is basic to the life of the church, it is striking that the research assistants found only 8 sermons out of 587 in which the preacher called for a response in terms of relating to the African tradition. The evidence of the interviews suggests that there is much tension and ambivalence in this area which may help to explain why it is an area which receives relatively little attention in preaching despite its great importance. The preachers were asked this question: "Do you preach the same message as Western Christianity or do you adapt your message to African beliefs and practices?" 39% answered "the same as Western Christianity" while 61% favoured adapting to African beliefs and practices. This difference of approach is found equally among the Roman Catholic and the Presbyterian preachers (Catholics 37/63%, Presbyterians 40/60%). Comments which were offered illustrate the diametrically opposed views on this point.

"We preach like Western Christianity. We tell our people to abandon most of their traditional beliefs and put no compromise."

"The same message as Western Christianity because I do not add or subtract anything to what the Bible teaches us."

"Because we are moving towards the Western civilization and hence many things should change to suit the Western."

"I preach the same message as Western Christianity since African beliefs and customs are regarded as something evil."

"I adapt my message to African beliefs and practices. Western Christianity does not take into account or understand our way of living so I find it important to preach what the people know."

"These days we have adapted the preaching according to our African beliefs unlike during the early times of our church in Malawi."

"According to African beliefs because many things were condemned by the Western missionaries which we did not find bad."

"With regard to African beliefs there I cannot run away for I am an African myself."

In order to explore in more detail these fundamental differences on the question of faith and culture we asked both preachers and members how they understood the message of the church on three issues of great importance in traditional African understanding: witchcraft, the ancestors, and disease, health and healing.

The answers on the question of witchcraft fell into three categories: that it is evil or sinful, that it is non-existent, or that the church has nothing to say about it at all. The tables below indicate for preachers and members how their answers broke down between these three categories, with percentages for all interviewees then for Roman Catholics and Presbyterians.

Preachers

	Evil	non-existent	Nothing at all
All	81	13	6
RC	78	15	7
CCAP	77	17	6

Members

	Evil	non-existent	Nothing at all
All	63	22	15
RC	57	25	18
CCAP	59	27	14

It is interesting to compare the figures for preachers and for members which suggest that there is a difference between the intention of the preachers and what is actually "heard" in the pew. Though 81% of the preachers intended to condemn witchcraft as evil, only 63% of members heard it being condemned. Conversely, though only 13% of preachers intended to teach that witchcraft is non-existent and only 6% intended to say nothing at all on the subject, the figures for the members are 22% and 15% respectively. It seems that in a significant number of cases preachers intend to take a firm stand on witchcraft but that this does not come across effectively to their hearers. The difficulty of the preachers is reflected in comments such as,

"It is very difficult to focus our message on this topic especially in this area where the majority believe in the existence of witchcraft, a fact which I can't dispute."

"It is hard to say something especially when you know already that people believe in it yet the Church condemns it."

"I do not particularly point out that witchcraft is condemned but I just tell them that Christians should follow what the Bible says."

Ambivalence on this issue is also evident in comments made by some of the members:

"This subject is not usually tackled since we do not know much about this."

"The church has always said that there is no witchcraft."

"In true sense witchcraft is there but the church says there is no witchcraft."

"We have in mind that there is witchcraft but it is a wonder that the church says there is no witchcraft."

"The church in our area is quiet on this issue because it is found out that even most church leaders believe and take part in witchcraft."

It appears that Christian faith and the experience of witchcraft coexist in separate compartments in the minds of believers and that there is little if any interaction between the two. Though there is widespread awareness that the church condemns witchcraft, its treatment of the subject is perceived to be superficial and is not taken seriously.

Regarding the ancestors, I found that there were three meaningful categories of answers: those which looked on the ancestors as having a positive role to play in their spirituality, and those which found the church had nothing to say on the subject. Accordingly the table of percentages are as below.

Preachers	Positive	Negative	Nothing
All	27	30	16
RC	51	14	6
CCAP	10	36	24
Members			
All	21	19	39
RC	42	12	25
CCAP	4	30	50

Again there is a clear discrepancy evident between what is intended by preachers and what is heard by members. The percentages holding that the church has nothing at all to say about ancestors are consistently higher for members than for preachers. This suggests that, while some preachers think they give a clear message on the subject of the ancestors, the message does not get across effectively. The other point which stands out is the difference between Catholics and Presbyterians. The Catholics have been successful in cultivating a much more positive approach to the ancestors whereas the Presbyterians predominantly take a negative view or say nothing at all. Some Presbyterians gave quite uncompromising answers, e.g., "The ancestral spirits do not exist and those believing in them are sinning against God because they are worshipping idols which is against the law of God." Others were more equivocal: "The ancestral spirits are real but the church does not allow us to believe in them." Catholics commonly gave more carefully nuanced answers: "Belief that ancestors exist is our culture and we have to respect them but the church emphasises much on the distinction between mere respect and worship." Some went further in accommodating the African tradition: "I try to encourage the people to pray to ancestral spirits. They are living and can be responsible for some of our good." Clearly this is a point where the contrasting traditions of Catholicism and Protestantism (regarding our attitude to the dead) have moulded their respective responses to the African tradition, in this case with regard to the ancestors.

The same point will be evident, perhaps more surprisingly, in relation to disease, health and healing. Here four categories could be discerned, with some answers including more than one category.

1. Those which in some way connected ill-health with evil or sin.
2. Those which explicitly rejected any such connection, making the point that illness is not a punishment.
3. Those which indicated that people ought to go to hospital when sick (as opposed to using traditional African remedies).
4. Those which stressed the importance of prayer in healing. The tables of the percentages which fell into each category are as follows:

Preachers

	Evil/Sin	Not Evil/Sin	Hospital	Prayer
All	26	5	45	59
RC	2	10	78	30
CCAP	39	2	28	73

Members

	Evil/Sin	Not Evil/Sin	Hospital	Prayer
All	26	3	38	67
RC	6	9	70	37
CCAP	43	0	25	79

The most striking point to emerge from these figures is the difference between Catholics and Presbyterians on the nature of illness and how to deal with it. It appears from the figures that the Presbyterians are much more inclined to regard illness as a spiritual problem requiring to be dealt with at a spiritual level, whereas the Catholics to a much greater extent look at ill-health as a physical problem which requires hospital treatment. 39% of Presbyterian preachers and 43% of members stress the connection between sin and illness whereas for the Catholics the corresponding figures are 2% and 6% respectively. Conversely, 10% of Catholic preachers and 9% of members stress that there is no such connection while this position is taken by only 2% of Presbyterian preachers and no members at all. 78% of Catholic preachers and 70% of members laid stress on the need to go to hospital in case of illness while for Presbyterians the corresponding figures are 28% and 25%. The figures are almost reversed when it comes to stressing the need for prayer in healing: Presbyterian preachers – 73%, members – 79%; Catholic preachers 30%, members 37%. This is a difference in approach between Catholic and Protestant which I did not expect and for which I have at present no explanation. However, the figures speak for themselves. Clearly this is an area

where there is considerable tension in the process of working out a Christian approach. Some preachers were honest enough to say, "I do not usually talk about health and healing. It is difficult to relate this to my sermons," or, "I have never preached on these." Again it seems that there are two worlds of thought which scarcely meet in Christian preaching. The comment of one of the preachers was revealing: "When sick, Christians should go to hospital, and to witchdoctors where extremely necessary." There seems to be little attempt to relate the two forms of medicine and to consider both in light of the faith. From the answers given in nationwide interviews it is clear that there is a very lively debate going on within Malawian Christianity as to how the church's message should be related to such central features of African consciousness as witchcraft, the ancestors, and disease, health and healing.

Attitudes to African Indigenous Churches

Research has been done on the life and worship of African Indigenous (or Independent) Churches which are known to be numerous and widespread in Malawi. Less attention has been given to exploring the relationship between such churches and the "original" mainstream churches. In this survey I sought to learn something about attitudes on the mainstream side of the relationship. A basic point which became clear was that most mainstream Christians are aware of the presence of Independent Churches. When asked, "Do you know of any 'African' or 'Independent' churches in your area?", 88% of preachers and 86% of members replied "yes". In order to probe the attitude to such churches I asked, "If so, why do some people join them?" Here the answers were organized into four categories, with a few including more than one category. 1. Those which stressed the low standards of the indigenous churches regarding the conduct required of their members. 2. Those which stressed the disagreements which had led people to leave their mainstream church in favour of an independent one. 3. Those which stressed the quality of the worship, fellowship or evangelism of the independent churches. 4. Those which stressed the cultural sensitivity which characterizes the independent churches. The table below gives the percentages of answers which fell into each category.

Preachers	Low standards	Disagreements	Quality	Culture
All	85	12	14	8
RC	84	11	12	9
CCAP	88	3	9	6
Members	Low standards	Disagreements	Quality	Culture
All	64	16	20	11
RC	60	18	21	13
CCAP	81	11	11	8

The predominant perception of the reason for people joining independent churches is their low standards. It is worth noting, however, that when preachers and members are compared, the members place less emphasis on low standards and more emphasis on the quality of their worship, fellowship and evangelism, and on their cultural sensitivity. Many of the comments stress the fact that the independent churches allow heathen practices and refer to this as "easy Christianity" or "cheap Christianity." A majority of mainstream Christians would agree with the assessment that "they don't want to follow what God really wants." Or, "They don't like the church's regulations. They want to drink beer, practise polygamy without being stopped by the church. Many Christians tend to come back to CCAP after realising that they were only attracted by worldly happiness, not heavenly happiness." This was made clear in the answers to a further question: "Can your church learn anything from such churches?" 42% replied "yes", while 58% replied "no" Even the 42% is rather an inflated figure since some of those who replied "yes" were thinking in terms of negative lessons. "Yes, that some people do run away from the truth and seek an easy life." "Yes, some people just pretend to pray but the power is not in them." Revealingly, "most of them are poor which means there is something wrong with them." The answers also demonstrated that Catholics are much better disposed to learning from the independent churches than are the Presbyterians. The yes/no proportion for Presbyterian preachers was 29/71, while for Catholics it was 54/46. This may reflect the fact that the independent churches have often originated in secessions from mainstream Protestant congregations whereas Catholic congregations have been less directly affected. Amongst the minority which believed their church could

learn from the independent churches there were many answers which revealed a positive and sympathetic appreciation of the witness of the "African" churches. Some of the comments are worth recording:

"Yes, Africanization of the church. Taking the church to the roots of African."

"We can learn the importance of our traditions. God accepts an African as he is. It is not good to copy all what the whites brought us."

"They provide what the people can't find in the world-wide churches. Their setting is in an African environment hence they can understand and play a great role."

"Quite a lot. More evangelistic practices. Less restraint in worship. Greater enjoyment of their faith."

"It can learn that even today people are being filled by the Holy Spirit as the Apostles did."

"It can learn that even today healing powers through the Holy Spirit still exist."

"Yes, their helping each other in building one's house or cultivating one's field is quite essential in these days when people care less about the aged and the sick."

Clearly there is among mainstream Christians a very positive appreciation of the life and witness of the independent churches but it should be stressed that this is found only among a minority. More representative is the answer of the interviewee who replied that his church could learn "nothing but misdirection" from the independent churches. There are also those for whom it is not a matter of choosing either mainstream or independent. A perceptive remark offered by a Catholic interviewee was that "there are some people who believe that the Independent churches are very competent in other areas where the Roman Catholic is weak." Across the spectrum of Christian belief and practice that is available to them there is evidence to suggest that

Malawians are "good shoppers of religious goods".⁴ Once again, perhaps the main point to emerge is that there is an active debate within mainstream Christianity on the question of how to understand and relate to the many independent churches in Malawi.

Faith – *Assensus* or *Fiducia*?

The numerical growth of the church in Africa has come to be recognised as one of the most significant religious developments of the 20th century. In stressing the numbers who are professing Christian faith, however, it is possible to overlook the question of the nature of the profession. In order to begin to address this question I asked the preachers, "What kind of faith do you seek to promote in your preaching? Then, "what proportion of your people have such faith?" The answers to the first question I divided into three categories. 1. "General" faith, i.e. faith in the reality of God without any explicitly Christian definition. 2. *Assensus*, i.e. faith understood as the acceptance of a propositional statement of Christian belief e.g. adhering to the doctrine of the Trinity or to the Apostles' Creed. 3. *Fiducia*, i.e. personal trust in God, believing "from the heart", a sense of having entrusted oneself to Christ, knowing assurance of salvation. The percentages of answers falling into each category can be summarised as follows:

	General	<i>Assensus</i>	<i>Fiducia</i>
All	22	42	36
RC	40	24	36
CCAP	9	61	30

Obviously this is a very crude method of assessing a very complex and highly differential phenomenon. The faith of any given individual may well include elements from all three categories – they are by no means mutually exclusive. Yet the figures may offer some clues as to the balance of emphasis. Only about one third looked at faith primarily in terms of *fiducia*, while some 40% stressed *assensus* and some 20% spoke in very general terms. The most striking contrast between the traditions is found in the 61% of Presbyterians who stressed *assensus* (Catholics 24%) and the 40% of Catholics who spoke in

⁴ See J.C. Chakanza & K.R. Ross, *Religious Pluralism in Contemporary Malawi*, (Zomba: University of Malawi, Sources for the Study of Religion in Malawi, No. 15), pp. 1–14.

general terms about faith (Presbyterians 9%). Perhaps the most revealing exercise is to look for each category at the answers to the follow-up question on how many of the church members have such faith. These I divided simply into majority or minority. What came out very clearly is that where faith was understood in general or *assensus* terms, a majority were thought to have such faith. Where faith was understood in terms of *fiducia*, it was more often thought that only a minority had such faith. This can be seen if we reproduce the above table and indicate for each figure the division between those who opted for majority and those for minority. The majority figure is given first, followed by the minority figure.

	General	<i>Assensus</i>	<i>Fiducia</i>
All	17/5	32/10	8/28
RC	32/8	9/15	5/31
CCAP	7/2	59/2	8/22

The general pattern is clear. Where faith is conceived in general or *assensus* terms, the preachers tend to think that the majority have such faith. Where it is conceived in terms of *fiducia*, they think that a minority has such faith. This is borne out by comments such as "100% have faith because it is preached so often" or "about 100% because this is explained in church." Here faith seems to be conceived as something that can be learnt like a lesson, so that once it has been explained it can be assumed that it is established. There is a significant sector especially of the CCAP church which looks at faith primarily in such *assensus* terms and finds, not surprisingly, that most members have such faith. On the other hand, those who conceive of faith in terms of *fiducia* were much more likely to lament the fact that only a small minority of their church members have such faith:

"A very small proportion. Many still are in doubt about the whole issue about Jesus."

"A small one to be frank. Many are in doubt about the relationship of Christ dying on the cross and our salvation today."

"A very small proportion. About 30-40%. Many doubt about eternal life after death."

"It is doubtful if many people in my church have true faith, faith with actions. Many seem to be devils in disguise. In public they do things correctly but in secret they are devils or behave abnormally."

"Out of 6,000 Christians in Xxxxxx Church the number is probably not more than 50."

The preachers who made these comments were clearly committed to nurturing *fiducia* and recognised that such an experience of faith was known only by a minority of the church members. This is true, of course, to varying degrees of the church at any time or place but the very sanguine assessments of church growth in African should be tempered by an awareness of the different kinds of faith which are expected and experienced in the Christian churches. The figures which have resulted from the interviews provide a very crude sort of analysis but they will be useful if they serve to open up discussion of a neglected but important area.

The Individual and the Community

A further question to ask is how far preaching is addressed to the personal life of the individual and how much to the life of the community at large. The fundamental finding here is that in the survey of themes covered in the 587 sermons the personal/individual received much more attention than the social/communal. However, in order to probe further the communal dimension a number of questions were included in the questionnaires. I asked church members first of all, "In what ways has the church's preaching helped you in your family life?" Nearly all had some positive response to this question and I noted that 81% stated that the preaching of the church had brought greater unity and mutual love to their families. Some had moving testimonies on this point, e.g. "At first we used to quarrel in our family – father beat mother, daughters always quarreling and equally sons. But we were visited by some Catholic people who converted us to their church and we discovered it's wonderful to travel with Jesus." To look beyond the family circle the next question was, "What difference, if any, do you think the preaching of the church makes in the life of your local community?" The answers fell into four categories.

1. Those which stressed the unity, peace and harmony which the preaching brought to the community.
2. Those which mentioned the conversions to Christian faith which had taken place.
3. Those which stressed the contribution of the preaching to the promotion of morality in the community.
4. Those which said that the preaching made no difference or very little.

The table below gives the percentages of answers which fell into each category. A few answers included more than one category.

	Unity	Conversions	Morality	None
All	26	23	28	28
RC	44	9	8	40
CCAP	8	31	47	22

It is striking that a fair proportion, especially among Catholics, consider that the preaching has negligible effect on the life of the community. Of those who believe it does have an impact, the Roman Catholics predominantly see it in terms of peace and unity while the Presbyterians predominantly see it in terms of morality and conversions.

Looking still wider, I asked church members, "Does the preaching of the church have importance for national affairs or is it addressed only to personal life?" Overall 75% favoured "national affairs" while 25% gave answers like, "Nothing for national affairs. Personal life, yes." Corresponding figures for Roman Catholics were 84/16 and for Presbyterians 66/34, suggesting a greater tendency among Presbyterians to restrict their preaching to personal life. In order to ascertain in what ways the preaching was expected to influence national life I asked the preachers, "What effects would you hope your preaching might have in national life?" The answers fell into five categories. 1. Those which stressed that it would bring unity, peace and harmony to the nation. 2. Those which stressed the promotion of morality or integrity. 3. Those which stressed that the nation would become God-fearing. 4. Those which said that obedience to the government would be promoted. 5. Those which stressed the church's responsibility to promote justice and human rights. The table below gives the percentage of answers which fell into each category.

	Unity	Morality	God-fearing	Obedience	Justice
All	56	27	13	15	3
RC	39	39	12	20	4
CCAP	68	17	15	5	0

Preaching is clearly seen as having a role in sustaining the social fabric of the nation but very much in terms of giving cohesion to the existing state of affairs rather than questioning or challenging it. We may note the very small numbers of those who made some mention of defending human rights or promoting justice. Many of the comments which were offered suggest that members saw the role of the church in national life as upholding and legitimating the status quo, e.g. "The life of the nation will improve since people will follow the Government laws which are the same as the laws of Moses and of God." The thought of the church having an active political role was so much anathema to one preacher that he listed this as one of the greatest dangers against which he warned: "Evil thoughts, drinking, luxuries, war, race relationships, *Christians in politics*, gambling, dishonesty in money and property." It must be observed, however, that all of the interviews were completed before the epochal Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter of Lent 1992 which signalled the beginning of a renewal of Christian social witness in Malawi.⁵ The survey of sermons continued for a few months after the Lenten letter and it was possible to notice a new note being struck in the preaching. A Roman Catholic priest in September 1992 asked his congregation in Lilongwe, "should we sacrifice our real Saviour Jesus Christ just because of what the government has laid down even when we see that it is not proper?" A CCAP minister in August asked his congregation in Mzuzu, "Other people are saying that the CCAP church has drifted away from preaching the Word of God but is going into politics. Now what is the Word of God? What is the duty of the church? The church is there to condemn injustice and advise on social justice and this is done through the Word of God." Such reports were enough to alert me to a possible change of emphasis in the preaching, with the message being much more directly addressed to the national life. More detailed studies are required to follow up this question. The main conclusion from this section seems to be that, though the preaching is concerned mainly with the belief and behaviour of the individual, there is also a

⁵ See above pp. 9-29.

general expectation that it has a role to play in family life, community life and national life. What that role should be may well be a question which provokes one of the most lively debates within the church in the coming years.

Preaching and Preachers

A final area of inquiry concerns people's understanding of the nature of preaching and their expectations of the preacher. Some questions in this area did not yield meaningful results but it is worth considering the answers to the question, "What should be the qualifications of a preacher?" This question was put both to preachers and to Church members and their answers fell into seven categories.

1. Those which stressed understanding of the Bible.
2. Those which stressed understanding of people.
3. Those which looked on preaching as a divine gift.
4. Those which stressed spiritual qualities, such as prayerfulness.
5. Those which mentioned technical qualities, such as an audible voice.
6. Those which mentioned qualities of character, such as faithfulness or honesty.
7. Those which stressed the importance of a high level of education.

The percentages of answers falling within each category are tabulated below.

Preachers

	All	RC	CCAP
Character	49	43	63
Education	37	34	37
Understanding of Bible	30	25	20
Spiritual qualities	23	21	18
Divine gift	12	18	10
Technical qualities	10	6	10
Understanding of people	8	9	6

Members

Education	42	51	41
Character	39	30	53
Understanding of Bible	23	26	15
Spiritual qualities	19	4	31
Divine gift	11	16	6
Technical qualities	5	2	9
Understanding of people	3	2	3

The figures suggest that sound character and good education are the qualities most valued in a preacher. Understanding of the Bible is also given some prominence, interestingly more so among Roman Catholic than Presbyterians.

A further enquiry involved asking church members, "Is the preaching of ordained clergy different from that of lay preachers? If so, what is the difference?" People answered either that there was no difference, or that the preaching of the clergy was better, or that the preaching of lay preachers was better. Their answers can be tabulated as follows:

	No difference	Clergy better	Lay better
All	41	48	11
RC	31	54	15
CCAP	56	40	4

Though it was only a minority which held that the preaching of laymen was better, some expressed their view strongly. "Laymen's preaching is better in that they know the ills of the people because they live together." "Yes, ordained clergymen make me sleep, especially the Bishop!" A greater number, however, expressed their appreciation of the better trained ordained preachers with comments like, "The clergymen preach by following step by step in order that one can easily hear the message while layman sometimes cannot follow the arrangement of words." The fact that almost half of church members found greater benefit from the preaching of the clergy may be sufficient to justify ordination and the years of training which it involves.

Conclusion

To end on a positive note, the research assistants carrying out the sermon survey were asked to assess the attentiveness of the congregations. 70% of the congregations were said to be very attentive, 28% slightly attentive, and only 2% not attentive at all. Some sermons aroused such interest that the research assistants were moved to emphasise that the congregation were "very, very attentive" This seems enough to suggest that preaching in mainstream churches is a lively and influential exercise. The research also suggests that its message is far from being fixed and monolithic. There is active debate on such questions as faith and culture, precepts and conduct, African culture and beliefs, and the tension between the personal and the communal outworking of Christian faith. When we compare the message brought by the Catholic Church to that of the Presbyterian there are striking similarities in approach and emphasis, though also significant differences owing to their distinctive traditions. The challenge lying ahead for further research will be to chart the changing shape of Malawian preaching as the Christian community grapples with such issues as social witness, sexual mores, health and healing, witchcraft, and the ancestors.

6. Vernacular Translation in Christian Mission: The Case of David Clement Scott and the Blantyre Mission 1888–1898

Introduction: The Reassessment of Christian Missions

For the last generation of scholarship there has been a common assumption that Christian missions in Africa were little more than colonialism in a religious form. Supposedly, the missionaries by their evangelization undermined African culture and by offering legitimation to colonial rule contributed to the subjugation of the African people.¹ With the advent of political independence from the late 1950s it was widely expected that African emancipation would involve the rejection of the alien religion of Europe. It is now apparent that, on the contrary, the post-Independence period has been one of rapid growth for the Christian Church in Africa. This development has provoked a reassessment of the impact which the European missionaries had on African life and culture. In his recent and influential book *Translating the Message*, Lamin Sanneh offers an alternative perspective.² On the basis of a study of Christian missiology from New Testament times, Sanneh argues that Christianity has spread on the basis of mission by translation. Rather than seeking to sustain itself by being confined within one hermetically sealed culture, it has repeatedly crossed into new cultures by undergoing a process of translation. No culture can therefore have an absolute claim on the gospel: "Any absolutizing force is an offense to the gospel, and a cultural tradition that arrogates to itself a deifying prerogative can expect nothing but implacable opposition from Christians."³ Rather than sustaining any cultural imperialism, the tendency of the Christian gospel is the reverse. The missionary experience of encountering the reality of God beyond the limits of one's own culture is one which always calls in question any

¹ See, e.g., B. Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (Leicester: Apollos, 1990).

² L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

claims of normativity which may be made for that culture. Sanneh concludes: "Contrary to much of the prevailing wisdom in this field of study, mission implies not so much a judgement on the cultural heritage of the convert as on that of the missionary."⁴ Since it operated on the basis of translation, the Christian mission did not favour the imposition of Western culture. Rather, the expectation was that the gospel would be translated so as to "make the recipient culture the true and final locus of the proclamation."⁵ The result was that "the spread of the religion thus turned on the revitalization of the immediate culture setting What the church received in surrender it handed back as transformed reward."⁶

Among the case studies used by Sanneh to substantiate his thesis is the career of David Livingstone in southern and central Africa. He notes Livingstone's admiration for the richness and subtlety of the Bantu languages and his determination that the Christian faith should be expressed in the vernacular. The confidence in "the inherent capabilities of the vernacular environment to nurture the gospel seed and rear its own version of the tree of salvation brought Livingstone into radical tension with his own European cultural roots."⁷ He sometimes suggested that African culture might prove a much better basis for the appropriation of Christianity. Notwithstanding his commitment to the spread of European political influence, he held on the principle that the Christian faith in Africa must be built on indigenous foundations. This tension in Livingstone's thought would be resolved only by subsequent history. It is clear, as Sanneh writes, that "an African Church, rooted in the vernacular, must inevitably come into conflict with a political system based in the superiority of foreign institutions."⁸ Comparing Livingstone with Cecil Rhodes, Sanneh comments, "Both dominated Central Africa: Rhodes left a legacy of white domination, Livingstone of rising African aspirations."⁹ Both men were empire-builders but, as Patrick Keatley observed in 1963, "it is not particularly difficult to predict which of the two empires will last longer, for Livingstone chose much the

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 65.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

sounder foundation."¹⁰ His commitment to the vernacular was sure in the end to undermine the colonial rule which he himself had paradoxically done much to put in place. The success of the translation enterprise initiated by Livingstone would ensure that a vernacular Christianity would remain and flourish long after the days of Western colonial rule had come to a close.

So far as Malawi is concerned, the task of building "Livingstone's empire" fell initially to the Scottish missionaries who followed in his footsteps. The purpose of this study is to consider the role of David Clement Scott of the Blantyre Mission in establishing vernacular Christianity. Though relatively little known, Scott was a key figure in the Livingstone tradition and one whose work will repay careful consideration in the reassessment of Christian mission now being undertaken.¹¹ The Blantyre Mission, named after Livingstone's birthplace, was begun by the Established Church of Scotland in 1876 to work in the Shire Highlands in what is now southern Malawi. Difficulties in the early years when the Mission became embroiled in local politics led to the dismissal of the first missionaries. The General Assembly in Edinburgh demanded that the Mission should confine its activities strictly to the evangelistic and appointed Clement Scott as its new leader. However, from the time of Scott's arrival in 1881 it was clear that he had no intention of working only in direct evangelism. "Christianity and commerce" – the renewal of the whole of life – remained the active policy of the Mission. Our study will concentrate on the period 1888–1898. This was when Scott was at the height of his influence. It was the period during which British colonial rule was imposed so that the tension between the "Rhodes vision" and the "Livingstone vision" became manifest within Malawian history. It is also the period for which we have best access to the thinking which inspired the Blantyre Mission under Scott since it was clearly stated in the columns of Malawi's first newspaper, the monthly *Life and Work in British Central Africa* which was published by Scott at the Blantyre Mission. The study should make it possible to evaluate how far Scott

¹⁰ P. Keatley, *The Politics of Partnership*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 121; cit. Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, p. 113.

¹¹ The only detailed treatment of Scott's work is found in A.C. Ross, "The Origins and Development of the Church of Scotland Mission, Blantyre, Nyasaland 1875–1926", (Ph.D., University of Edinburgh, 1968). The present writer is much indebted to this pioneering study which regrettably has never been published.

was a successful exponent of the translation principle and to begin an assessment of its impact on the Malawian church and society.

The Blantyre Mission and the Vernacular Languages

In common with many other Christian mission it was in the field of linguistics that some of the most distinguished work of the Blantyre Mission was done. From the beginning the missionaries applied themselves to learning the local languages. The extent of their success was made clear by the publication of D.C. Scott's *A Cyclopaedic Dictionary of the Mang'anja Language* in 1892.¹² This was a magisterial work demonstrating not only great philological skill but profound understanding of Mang'anja culture and idiom. Already by this time the Mission had published small books of Mang'anja and Yao hymns.¹³ Scott also worked steadily on the translation of the Bible into Mang'anja. Matthew and Mark were published in 1892, Luke and John in 1893, and Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians in 1894.¹⁴ This work on the vernacular languages was quite central to Scott's vision of Christian faith and worship in the Shire Highlands. When the Church of St. Michael and All Angels was being built in 1889, he wrote as follows:

It is intended to make the Native Service, when we can get into our new Church, the regular diet of morning worship. Mang'anja is well enough understood almost for everyone to join intelligently in the worship, and the prayers are sufficiently dignified and comprehensive to afford utterance of what is common to all, European or native: the fervency of such an act as this will, we are persuaded, do more than anything else to breathe upon this land the Holy Ghost.¹⁵

¹² D.C. Scott, *A Cyclopaedic Dictionary of the Mang'anja Language*, (Edinburgh: Foreign Missions Committee of the Church of Scotland, 1892)

¹³ *Life and Work in British Central Africa*, February 1896.

¹⁴ See S.D. Chipangwi, "Why People Join the Christian Church: Trends in Church Growth in the Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian 1960–1975", (Ph.D., University of Aberdeen, 1978), p. 150.

¹⁵ LWBCA, March 1889.

This intention was restated the following year in the confidence that "the benefit of worship in clear Mang'anja will be felt by all."¹⁶ Central to Scott's mission programme was the conviction that Christian faith should be expressed in the vernacular.

"Native Agents" in the Work of the Mission

From the time of his arrival in 1881 Scott attached great importance to the role of African converts in the spread of the faith. He worked closely with the small group of Africans who had been attracted to the Mission during the unhappy early period under Duff MacDonald.¹⁷ Some of these, notably Joseph Bismarck, Rondau Kaferanjila and Donald Malota, proved to be outstanding leadership material. It was they who spearheaded many of the Mission's early advances. During the early days of Domasi Mission we find R.S. Hynde writing, "Rondau is a great help and I hope you won't think of taking him away in a hurry."¹⁸ In an account of an early morning service in Malemia's village we read that "Bismarck as usual delivered the address."¹⁹ In late 1890 we have the report that "Rondau who has been carrying on Chiradzulu station, and has done extremely well in difficult work, comes into Blantyre for a short time, while Kapito takes his place."²⁰ The kind of status and independence enjoyed by these men may be gauged by the brief record in 1889 "that Bismarck has given £1 toward the building of the new Church."²¹ The best account of the kind of responsibility entrusted to African leaders is found in the memoirs of Bismarck's son-in-law, Lewis Bandawe, who was in sole charge of Mihecani Mission in the years following World War I.²² This confidence in the capacity of African converts to carry forward the work of the Mission indicates the underlying commitment to the translation principle. The aim from the beginning was the growth of an African Christianity.

¹⁶ LWBCA, May 1890.

¹⁷ See Ross, "Origins and Development", p. 106.

¹⁸ LWBCA, August 1888.

¹⁹ LWBCA, December 1888.

²⁰ LWBCA, November 1890

²¹ LWBCA, July 1889.

²² L.M. Bandawe, *Memoirs of a Malawian*, (Blantyre: CLAIM, 1971), pp. 90-97

The training of Africans took more formal shape in 1893 with the announcement that "a deacons' class of seven but representative of many more, who will in like manner devote themselves to service, meets every morning at 7 o'clock. They take a lively interest in Biblical Criticism, Theology, Church History, and Liturgics."²³ The class was composed of John Macrae Chipuliko, Mungo Murray Chisuse, Thomas Mpeni, James Gray Kamlinje, James Auldearn Mwembe, John Gray Kufa and Harry Kambwiri. All seven successfully completed their course and were ordained as deacons on 4th November 1894.²⁴ The office of deacon is not a familiar one in the Presbyterian churches and it seems that Scott deliberately sought to create a new office: "there is no office at home exactly like it: it is distinctly African."²⁵ They seem to have been expected to fulfil leadership responsibilities in all the varied work of the mission. Mungo Chisuse trained as a printer and Scott liked to boast that "all our printing at Blantyre has been done by our native staff. We have never had a European printer, nor European instruction of any kind."²⁶ Though they acted in a subordinate capacity the deacons were entrusted by Scott with considerable responsibility. When a mission station was opened in Angoniland (Ntcheu) it was Harry Kambwiri Matecheta who was chosen to lead the work, along with two lady missionaries.²⁷ In the matter of discipline Scott wrote:

We find a great deal of help from the Deacons' Court which has become so useful as to promise to be a settled method of Church discipline. We would keep it informal as long as we possibly can. The Deacons and Christian members of the Church should feel that the responsibility of the effective testimony and growth of church life lies a great deal upon themselves. One could wish for no weightier justice than that of native *mlandu*—power Christianized into a Church Court.²⁸

It was with this kind of drawing on African resources that Scott set about the task of spreading the Christian faith. The annual meeting of the Mission Council was merely a formality. Effective oversight of

²³ LWBCA, May 1893.

²⁴ LWBCA, November 1894.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ LWBCA, January 1895.

²⁷ LWBCA, September 1893.

²⁸ LWBCA October 1894, November 1894.

the work of the mission was exercised by Scott and his African deacons. This provoked resentment among some of the European missionaries and, after Scott left in 1898, it was made clear by the Foreign Mission Committee that "our Church" was to be developed according to the constitution of the Church of Scotland.²⁹ By that time, however, the translation process was underway, not only linguistically but in terms of African leadership and initiative. As Lamin Sanneh observes, "When one translates, it is like pulling the trigger of a loaded gun: the translator cannot recall the hurtling bullet."³⁰

Mission Involvement in African Life

The Blantyre missionaries were deeply involved not only with the vernacular languages and with their own African converts but also with the affairs of the communities among which they lived. This is evidenced in the reports which appeared especially in the early editions of the Mission newspaper describing *milandu* which were taking place in the surrounding communities.³¹ Much time and effort were devoted to these cases and great was the joy when a satisfactory outcome occurred. The respect which the missionaries had for the *mlandu* tradition can be gauged from the brief obituary of a local chief which they published in 1893:

The death of Matope on 18th May is to be recorded with deep regret. He was an enlightened friend and wise chief, and his conduct of his own *milandu* as well as of those involving relations with Europeans was always constitutional and self-restrained. The natives say, "who will speak the *mlandu* now?", and certainly Matope was powerful in this respect. To those who know the language and native custom, men like Matope are far more like our best parliamentary speakers than those who do not know can understand.³²

This sympathetic understanding of African ways and customs fostered a hospitality towards traditional rites and usages. Local customs in burial practice were incorporated in the Christian rite. Marriage was

²⁹ See Ross, "Origins and Development" p. 298.

³⁰ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, p. 53.

³¹ See, e.g., *LWBCA*, September 1888, March 1889, April 1889.

treated as a matter involving not just the couple concerned but the whole family, including the *ankhoswe*.³³ Andrew Ross records that "on the nights when the moon was full and there was no cloud, Scott had the boarders gather on the *bwalo* to dance and play games and sing as they would have done at home in the villages on such a night."³⁴ The world of the vernacular was regarded not as something to be displaced but as a culture with its own integrity in which the gospel of Christ could take root and grow.

When Mission converts in 1893–94 formed their own Blantyre Christian Association, Scott observed of its proceedings that "original speeches and ideas still prove the vitality of native life."³⁵ In fact, he could on occasion point out some respect in which African life was to be preferred to European: "Religion here comes in quite naturally as the normal mode of ordinary life bringing under its sweep every other lawful thing. This seems to us a marked advance upon the distinction between secular and sacred so commonly made in the mother country."³⁶ The expectation that African life would prove to be fruitful soil for the gospel was not only a theoretical matter. It manifested itself in a commitment to individuals. Perhaps this is most poignantly brought out in the pathos of the following comment on one of the Mission's failures:

During this year Kolimbo has left. His fits of intemperance, in one of which he burned his house, have been forgiven very often, but when this last break-out was brought to our notice, the strain of it was too great, and his conscience while he was in the Mission was ashamed of what he did. He has left of his own accord at last, after we had spent years in the endeavour to help him, and has gone with his wife to Kumtaja's. Perhaps what he has learnt may still keep with him and eventually lead him right.³⁷

It was this expectation of the capacity of African life to embrace the gospel of Christ which was to bear fruit in the lives of many others.

³² *LWBCA*, June 1893.

³³ Ross, "Origins and Development", pp. 270–272.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 120–121.

³⁵ *LWBCA*, March 1894.

³⁶ *LWBCA*, October 1893.

Clement Scott's Philosophy of Mission

The starting point of Scott's philosophy of mission was the dignity and God-given integrity of Africa and its people. His vision was vigorously anti-racist:

We are working here for the unity of the Church European and African. It has been the aim of the Mission during all those past years to bring and keep together the two parts of the Church – native and foreign. It would be a great blow to the Church of Christ should there arise in the future such a severance as we confess exists in the Colony between the native and European portions of it. Both portions will greatly increase as time goes on. We long to see them increasing together – not side by side but as one... *In God's great wisdom the native may be saved without us, but we doubt if we here can be saved without the native.* (My italics.)³⁸

A practical demonstration of this outlook was found in the births, marriages and deaths column of *Life and Work in British Central Africa*. There was no distinction made between European and African. The list simply followed alphabetical order.³⁹ At a time when Europeans tended to assume that only after many generations would Africans be equipped to occupy positions of responsibility, Scott thought differently:

People will not believe how much the African is capable of until they have tried. Our aim is always to teach how to bear responsibility, and, at the proper time to lay it upon those who are to bear it. *In many ways that time has come now.* It is a fatal mistake to keep the African in leading strings. We cannot too soon teach him to realise that he has a part to play in the education and life of Christ's Church and kingdom. (My italics.)⁴⁰

³⁷ LWBCA, May 1889.

³⁸ LWBCA, December 1891.

³⁹ LWBCA, *passim*.

⁴⁰ LWBCA, June 1895.

The great expectations which Scott cherished regarding the contribution which Africans would make to the Christian Church arose not only from his philosophy of mission but also from what he saw of the village Christianity which was now becoming established. His estimation of the quality of African Christian faith may be gauged from the following brief report:

We had in (Malunga's village) the spectacle of native Christian households, and of converts being true to their profession in the midst of native heathen custom, amongst their tribal brethren around. The Christianity is of a very high and pure type, exceptionally clear in its moral standpoint, and partaking of the old Yao and Mang'anja balance of thought.⁴¹

Far from Africa being an inferior "dark continent" which depended on Europeans for enlightenment, in Scott's view there was an inspiration available in Africa which could benefit those who were open to it. On the death of Henry Henderson, one of the pioneers of the Blantyre Mission, Scott made this comment: "True Africans (sic) draw from Africa their inspiration as Steere and Livingstone, and Colenso have done; and so did Henderson."⁴² This is not to say that Scott was romantic or undiscerning in his attitude to African life. Polygamy and witchcraft he rejected as uncompromisingly as any missionary of his generation. Yet his overall respect for African people and values led him to proceed carefully and sensitively even in relation to beliefs and values which he found incompatible with the Christian faith. After some large *unyago* dances had taken place he made the following comment:

No good whatever is done by rudely rushing in and overthrowing conscientious things (however dark the conscience that does them) which have held ground for centuries, merely until Christianity takes hold of them for English discipline's sake and difference of opinion; but incalculable good may be done by a presence among them and appeal to them on the grounds argued as we stood amongst

⁴¹ LWBCA, November 1894.

⁴² LWBCA, March 1891.

them; for then they are compelled by gentleness rather than silenced by force.⁴³

Such sensitivity arose directly from a philosophy of mission which saw God-given dignity and inspiration already present in African life as the foundation on which the African Christian Church would be built.

What then was the role of Christianity and the Christian missionary on the continent of Africa? Scott's answer was that the missionary "does not produce a non-native product, he only brings civilization before the native spirit as its inheritance and its right, to allow the native spirit, not merely to develop a native Christianity, but to become a conscious member of the Catholic Church of Christ."⁴⁴ The great monument to Scott's vision in this respect is the "cathedral church" of St. Michael and All Angels at Blantyre which he completed in 1891. Built by a Scottish Protestant missionary with African labour and African materials, its extraordinary architecture includes features drawn from Moorish, Byzantine and medieval European designs. The building reflects Scott's conviction that as the African Church grew and formed its own identity it must be enabled to draw on the whole history and tradition of the Catholic faith.⁴⁵ To balance the African and the catholic – in this the European missionary had an indispensable role to play. The European presence was therefore necessary – but there was no equivocation about what its goal and objective must be: "'Africa for the Africans' has been our policy from the first, and we believe that God has given this country into our hands that we may train its peoples how to develop its marvellous resources for themselves."⁴⁶ Small wonder that Scott proved to be a stumbling block to the first colonial Government! His vision was that of letting loose the dynamic of translation at the heart of African life. His expectations regarding the growth of vernacular Christianity are perhaps best expressed in the following passage:

⁴³ LWBCA, August 1889.

⁴⁴ LWBCA, January 1895.

⁴⁵ The construction of the building is well described in a locally published pamphlet to mark its centenary: *St. Michael and All Angles 1891–1991 100 Years*, (Blantyre, 1991).

⁴⁶ LWBCA, January 1895.

We must beware of woodenness in our development of African Life. To attempt to force on Africa the details of Church life and organisation at home is we believe fatal to true growth. African life must be met in its own way, and it will grow on its own lines. No one who understands the problem before him would dream for a moment of employing the same evangelistic methods in this country as one would do at home. Neither can we expect that native church life will move in the grooves cut out for it elsewhere. We have said it again and again, and we repeat *ad nauseam* that the African has got his own gift of Life and Work to present to the Church Catholic.⁴⁷

This was the dynamic which was let loose in the increasing number of villages with which the Blantyre Mission had contact. It was a dynamic potent to reinvigorate – not to destroy – the best of traditional life and culture, a dynamic subversive of all attempts to force a foreign mould upon African life, a dynamic which could not be stopped from creating an African Christianity which would have its own character and integrity. Having with determination embarked upon the translation process, the missionaries were now prepared to see the African Church arising in its own way and growing on its own lines. They were heirs of the Livingstone vision. Conflict with those who subscribed to the vision of the other empire-builder was inevitable.

The Mission and the Advent of Colonial Rule

For the first twelve years of its history the Blantyre Mission developed its own relations with surrounding chiefs without invoking British political authority. Towards the end of the 1880s, however, the missionaries became concerned about the territorial ambitions of the Arabs and the Portuguese. In particular they were dismayed by the Portuguese claim on the Shire Highlands:

Rumours from home speak of a division of territory between Portugal and Britain in which the Shire is the boundary line. This is disastrous if it is true: it is indeed 'keeping the shell and giving Portugal the kernel'. We must hold fast to this

⁴⁷ LWBCA, September 1895.

stronghold and gateway of African civilization whatever comes, and in face of what Lord Salisbury and home authorities know of the Shire Highlands, we feel persuaded enough to say of the possibility of its becoming eventually Portuguese, that we don't believe it!⁴⁸

A British Protectorate seemed the only satisfactory alternative to the Portuguese annexation which the missionaries believed would be injurious both to their own work and to the interests of the population at large. Accordingly they launched a vigorous and finally successful campaign to persuade the British Government to withdraw from its initial willingness to cede the area to Portugal, and to establish a formal British Protectorate.⁴⁹ To that extent the Mission was responsible for the advent of colonial rule. The conditions under which the British protection was offered were, however, a matter of much concern to the Blantyre missionaries. In their view what was required was protection from outside interference but minimum disruption of the internal affairs of the people of the territory.

In particular they were dismayed by the prospect of Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company being given the responsibility of ruling the country: "A Chartered Company is not a government and never can be. To be ruled by such is to be ruled for commercial ends by absentee directors and shareholders whose real interests are only served by tangible dividends."⁵⁰ For years Rhodes manoeuvred to establish his influence in Nyasaland but always was met with the inflexible opposition of Clement Scott and his colleagues. In 1894, when Rhodes made a gift of £17,000 to the government of the Protectorate, the comment in the Blantyre Mission newspaper was as follows: "The government by £17,000 of alien money must be exercised to that amount in the interests of that alien influence, and that alien influence lacks the essential elements, the dignity, the impartiality, the esprit de coeur of a British government. The effects *cannot be good*."⁵¹ In the judgement of Sir Harry Johnston, the pioneering British Consul and an associate of Rhodes, it was the Blantyre missionaries who were mainly responsible for the failure of

⁴⁸ LWBCA, June 1889.

⁴⁹ See B. Pachai, *Malawi: The History of the Nation*, (London: Longman 1973), pp. 70–80.

⁵⁰ LWBCA, October 1890.

⁵¹ LWBCA, July 1894.

Rhodes' efforts to embrace Nyasaland within his empire. In 1893 Johnston wrote to Rhodes as follows:

I don't think you have ever realised the bitter hatred borne you by these Scotch missionaries of Blantyre. They hate you because you are an Englishman because you threaten to overshadow their own petty meddling and muddling with grander schemes that will outshine mission work in popular favour. Remember it was mainly Scott and Hetherwick who balked the scheme in 1890 of all BCA coming under the Company's Charter. They are now up and at it again and the most serious enemies you possess.⁵²

Johnston's perception was correct: the fulfilment of the Blantyre Mission vision was incompatible with Company rule. The translation and "take-off" of the Gospel within vernacular life could not but be subversive of Rhodes' brand of colonialism. Their awareness of this incipient conflict of interests provoked the missionaries' implacable opposition to any advance of Rhodes' influence in Nyasaland.

It also made them the most persistent critics of the first British Administration whenever its actions appeared to them to be harmful to the interests of the African population. The Blantyre Mission position on the crucial question of land illustrates the way in which it came to be regarded as the champion of African interests.

We have always held that the land belongs to the people, and have ever questioned the legal and moral right of the chief to sell any part of his territory over the heads of those dwelling on it without safe-guarding to them the right to have room to plant and build. A very large part of the Shire Highlands is claimed by European purchasers.... Where is the native community soon to find room to hoe and plant its food crop?

It is we hope not yet too late to secure for them part at least of the rights which in not a few cases they have unwittingly disposed of. We wish to see such limitations laid down as will secure to the native the right to hoe his garden and build his village, without having to fear such visitations of the

⁵² Johnston to Rhodes 7 June 1893, Sal. Rhod. Archives LT/1/16/4/1; cit Ross "Origins and Development", pp. 198–199.

purchasers of the land, should he refuse to leave his own garden during the hoeing season to hoe theirs.⁵³

So persistent was the Blantyre Mission in questioning the policies of the Administration on such matters as land, labour and taxation that in 1894 Alfred Sharpe reported that,

Mr. Commissioner Johnston in his dispatches advised that there would be no permanent and satisfactory state of things with regard to this Mission until two missionaries, The Rev D.C. Scott and the Rev Alexander Hetherwick, were removed from the country.... The missionaries are taking a course that makes them appear in the eyes of the natives of this Protectorate as an Opposition party to H. M.. Administration.⁵⁴

In the case of the Blantyre Mission the incipient incompatibility with colonialism which was built into its philosophy of mission did not take long to come out into the open!

Having been instrumental in the imposition of British rule the Blantyre Mission maintained a close watch on the way in which this rule was exercised. At a time when British military force was being widely used to impose the authority of the new Administration, the Mission commented:

We cannot treat the land as a conquered country, and we must in every case of confiscation or annexation have the very best proof to show that no other way than fighting the natives was possible. We have all along believed and believe still that the British Government could rule and develop this whole African Empire, in all questions really native *without striking a blow*. We grant it means endless tact and patience and real grip of native language, life, customs and history but this is easily obtainable.⁵⁵

The task which the Mission set the Administration was that of coming to terms with the vernacular world around them rather than being satisfied with the imposition of alien norms and values. It was in the

⁵³ LWBCA, February 1892.

⁵⁴ Alfred Sharpe (to Kimberley, 31 October 1894, F.O. 2/67); cit. Ross, "Origins and Development", p. 197

⁵⁵ LWBCA, December 1894.

vernacular world that the Mission was operating in its work of translation and Scott had every confidence that there was a firm basis there for the effective exercise of British rule:

We ask too for a constitutional mode of dealing with the native life about us. We ask that the authority and influence of the native chiefs in the country be recognised, and their counsel sought in dealing with the people. The African if he is anything is constitutional – no change or step of importance is taken without first open 'mlandu' in which the opinion of all is fully sought and expressed. We hope to see the same constitutional methods continued in all future changes. The native recognises them and obeys them, and when similar modes are followed he will obey the new power as readily as the old. The native and native life must be developed and not crushed.⁵⁶

This is the kind of confidence in African life and values which was essential to the translation principle but, finally, was at odds with the assumptions of colonial rule.

Conclusion: The Impact of Missionary Translation

An accurate assessment of the role of David Clement Scott and the early Blantyre missionaries will have to take account of their commitment to the translation principle. The decisive factor in their work was their confidence in the vernacular, the hallmark of authentic Christian mission. Not for them the imposition of alien norms. They were committed to the principle that conversion should be mounted on indigenous foundations. Vernacular concepts and usages must be allowed to determine the assimilation of Christianity. This conviction was what prompted their commitment to the vernacular languages, their confidence in African Christians and their deep engagement with African life and thought. Their dream was not the imposition of their own pattern of church life. Rather, they embarked with vigour upon a process of translation the end result of which was unknown to them. For it would arise, in large measure, out of the revitalization of vernacular resources effected by the impact of the Christian Gospel. Just as Christianity, in a sense, gained from its translation across

⁵⁶ LWBCA, November 1891.

earlier cultural frontiers, so now it must gain from its translation into African culture. Clement Scott was acutely aware of this process

In the first centuries of Christianity amid the fire of fierce persecution the creed of the Christian Church was formulated by the acute Greek intellect trained for that purpose by centuries of philosophical speculation. Imperial Rome lent to the Gospel the type of law and organised order. The Teutonic and Anglo-Saxon races received it and gave it their aggressive spirit of self-propagation. Now the Church has come to the African, and his contribution to Christian life and thought is still to be given. What will it be?⁵⁷

The answer would be given only when the translation process had taken effect.

In arguing that the missionary commitment to the translation principle was ultimately subversive of colonialism it is not necessary to deny that the missionaries played a part in the spread of European influence and indeed the imposition of colonial rule. They shared many of the assumptions of their time about the need of Africa for "civilization", the benefits of European domination, and the idea of trusteeship. It is revealing that they referred to African mission workers, even the most senior, as our "boys."⁵⁸ As British rule became a reality during the 1890s it is apparent that in many respects the missionaries identified increasingly with their compatriots in the Administration. After Scott's departure the Blantyre Mission lost much its radical edge and tended to fall in more easily with colonialist assumptions. Alexander Hetherwick, who succeeded Scott, continued to champion African interests but seemed more content to work within the colonialist *status quo*. It was, in the judgement of Andrew Ross, "a drastic departure from D.C. Scott's vision of Africa's future, where the role of European was to be an aid to African development and always secondary to African needs."⁵⁹

As the 1890s progressed it became increasingly apparent that Scott's vision was losing favour with the Foreign Missions Committee in

⁵⁷ LWBCA, April 1895.

⁵⁸ LWBCA, *passim*.

Edinburgh and with new members of the Blantyre Mission staff. In 1897 a General Assembly Commission was appointed to investigate and heard complaints that Scott was autocratic, "Anglicanizing" and ineffective as a missionary leader. Underlying these criticisms was a growing European consensus that Scott's vision of a quickly emerging African Christianity was unworkable and even dangerous.⁶⁰ Though Scott was officially exonerated by the Commission it was said to be a verdict of "not guilty; but don't do it again."⁶¹ Steps were taken to bring the Mission "into line." The Mission Council, composed exclusively of white missionaries, was given effective administrative control. It was made clear that Presbyterian forms of worship and church government were to be strictly observed. Scott himself was to be kept under tight control, with detailed supervision even of what he preached. It was too much for him, his health broke down and he left for the last time in 1898.⁶² The church, at least superficially, was being swept along by the tide of racist and colonialist thinking which was then in full spate. There seemed to be no place for Scott's vision of an African Church developing on its own lines with only the loosest of connections to Scotland. Yet at the grassroots such a process was underway. The translation process, having begun, now had a momentum of its own. Vernacular Christianity was a fact in the villages and in its development drew deeply on African life and customs as well as the Scriptures and traditions of the Church.

This vigorous movement of Christian faith begetting the revitalization of the vernacular had to come into conflict with colonialism with its assumptions of Western superiority. In fact, to a significant extent Malawian nationalism grew out of the work of the missions. It is worthy of note that the future nationalist leader Hastings Banda (later "Life" President of Malawi) collaborated in the 1940s with the missionary Cullen Young in the publication of a volume entitled *Our African Way of Life*.⁶³ This is a classic illustration of Sanneh's thesis that "at the heart of the nationalist awakening was the cultural pride

⁵⁹ Ross, "Origins and Development", p. 223. For a more favourable account of Hetherwick's work see W.P. Livingstone, *A Prince of Missionaries*, (London: James Clarke, n.d.)

⁶⁰ See Ross, "Origins and Development", pp. 255-275.

⁶¹ *Scotsman*, 25 March 1987; cit Ross, "Origins and Development", p. 293

⁶² Ross, "Origins and Development", p. 295.

that missionary translations and the attendant linguistic research stimulated."⁶⁴ The Blantyre Mission was always at the centre of movements of Malawian nationalism. After the Chilembwe Rising of 1915 it was found that no less than 84 of the rebels were baptized members of the Blantyre Mission.⁶⁵ A distinguished product of the Mission, Lewis Bandawe, was instrumental in the formation of the Nyasaland African Congress in the 1940s.⁶⁶ In the struggle of the 1950s to overthrow the racist Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland the Blantyre Mission was in the forefront.⁶⁷ This history must be read as, at least in part, the outcome of the commitment to the translation principle first applied in the region by David Livingstone and put into effect with much flair and imagination by David Clement Scott at the Blantyre Mission. The fact that Christian faith had been so early released into the vernacular and had been able to absorb the strength and vigour of African life and culture meant that the life of the Church was little affected by the advent of political independence. It was in no way dependent on colonial rule. In many respects the life of the Church was in antithesis to it. So the progress of the Blantyre Mission continued steadily with an annual growth rate of almost 6% between 1956 and 1976.⁶⁸ Changing political circumstances were of limited significance to Malawian Christianity since its roots were now deep in vernacular life. In the translation process which was responsible for this remarkable outcome Clement Scott was an important figure. Moreover, he was outstandingly sharp in his understanding and exposition of the principle of Christian mission as translation. In this respect his work merits continuing attention.

63 C. Young and H. Banda eds., *Our African Way of Life*, (London: United Society for Christian Literature, 1946).

64 Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, p. 106.

65 I. and J. Linden, *Catholics, Peasants and Chewa Resistance in Nyasaland 1889-1939*, (London: Heinemann, 1974), p. 101. See also G. Shepperson and T. Price, *Independent African*, Edinburgh: The University Press, 1958), pp. 363-380.

66 See Bandawe, *Memoirs of a Malawian*, pp. 130-131.

67 See K.N. Mufuka, *Missions and Politics in Malawi*, (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1977), pp. 146-195.

68 Chipangwi, "Why People Join the Christian Church", p. 300.

7. The African Church and Eastern Orthodoxy: Reflections on the Centenary of St. Michael and All Angels

Introduction: St. Michael and All Angels.

1991 marked the centenary of Central Africa's oldest, and perhaps its most remarkable, church building – St. Michael and All Angels in Blantyre, Malawi. It was built as the "mother-church" of the Blantyre Mission of the Church of Scotland and remains today very much the "cathedral church" of the Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian. Attention has often been given to the extraordinary ambition that inspired the design of the church and the tremendous achievement of completing the construction with minimal resources. David Clement Scott, the Scottish missionary who designed the church, had no architectural training. Nor had any of his team of builders even seen such a building. Yet Scott himself carved the eighty-one different patterns for the brick-moulds and supervised the construction of a building so impressive and elaborate as to be to this day a major tourist attraction. The church has a distinctive design – it is topped by Byzantine domes and turrets. While these have often been admired, little attention has been given to their theological significance. The design of the building was intended to make a point. It is in fact a monument to Clement Scott's theology of mission, which he once expressed in these words: "(The missionary) does not produce a non-native product, he only brings civilization before the native spirit as its inheritance and its right, to allow the native spirit not merely to develop a native Christianity but to become a conscious member of the Church of Christ."¹

Scott's vision for African Christianity was that it should be both indigenous and Catholic. He was powerfully aware of the need for the Church to take on a genuinely African character: "We must beware of woodenness in our development of African life. To attempt to force on Africa the details of Church life and organisation at home is we believe fatal to true growth. African life must be met in its own way,

¹ *Life and Work in British Central Africa*, May 1894.

and it will grow on its own lines"² Scott's concern for the "Africanness" of the Church was, however, united with a profound commitment to the Catholicity of the emerging Church. In fact, the two belonged together. Andrew Ross has commented on the significance of St. Michael and All Angels in this regard:

This extraordinary building with its blend of Moorish and Byzantine features together with those of medieval European, is a vivid representation of Scott's concept of the future of the Church in Africa, and the goal towards the achievement of which the energies of the mission were to be concentrated. He had a deep historical sense through which he saw the Church as a living organism existing down the ages, changing and adapting itself to suit the varying circumstances it faced. It was the fullness of this tradition that he wished for Africa, indeed that he held to be Africa's due. A really African Church could only find itself if it were allowed to grow in relation to that whole tradition, not if restrained by one single strand of that tradition.³

In giving prominence in the building to Byzantine features, Scott directed attention to the Eastern tradition of Christianity. It was not a line of thought which he was able to pursue very far himself. Nor has the subsequent history of Central African Christianity followed up to any significant extent the "hint" which Scott left so conspicuously on his building. What follows is an attempt to "take the hint" at a theological level by exploring what benefits the growing African Church may derive from the experience and the theology of Eastern Christianity. Perhaps Scott would have regarded this as a fitting response to the centenary of his remarkable building.

The Culture of Symbol

The Protestantism which Scott represented is distinguished by the centrality which it gives to the Word of God in worship. Church architecture and liturgy are endowed with maximum simplicity in order to concentrate all attention on the spoken Word. To many Africans this seems an over-cerebral approach to worship, one which may grasp them at one level but which leaves large parts of their

² *Life and Work in British Central Africa*, September 1895.

³ A.C. Ross, "The Origins and Development of the Church of Scotland Mission, Blantyre, Nyasaland 1879-1926" (PhD, University of Edinburgh, 1968), pp. 253-54.

beings unmoved. There seems to be a protest in African Christianity which sees much justice in Edwin Muir's complaint that the Word which become flesh is, in Protestant worship, made Word again! What particularly rankles is the absence of ritual and symbolism. Adrian Hastings noted this point when considering the worship of the African Independent Churches:

While incorporating all the main traditional elements of public Christian prayer, it seems to obtain its special character from its ability to create a public liturgy which makes full cultural sense to its participants in terms of the symbol, gesture and language it incorporates. There is a reaction here to the liturgical poverty of many western missions as well as a reappropriation of traditional symbols. The splendid and moving liturgies which have been evolved in many churches do suggest affinities with the orthodox worship of eastern Europe, the Middle East and Ethiopia, in contrast to the rather rationalised and privatised patterns of prayer more characteristic of modern Protestantism.⁴

In Eastern Orthodoxy a culture of symbolism has been developed in which shape and colour, singing and silence, light and darkness, gesture and movement, fasting and feasting draw together every aspect of human experience to form a comprehensive ritual. This ritual is at once grounded in biblical history and deeply embedded in the social life of the people. The Eastern theology underlying the use of symbols in worship was worked out in the Iconoclast Controversy of the 8th and 9th centuries. At issue was the question of whether it was legitimate to use pictorial representations of Christ and other saintly figures as aids to devotion. The Eastern conclusion was that icons were not only legitimized but required by the incarnation of Christ which gave to the whole of reality a sacramental significance. Iconoclasm, from this perspective, was a denial of the reality of the history of Christ which the icons sought to portray.

An important part of the "iconophiles" argument was that true worship required the engagement of sight as well as hearing. There was a far-reaching theological point being made here. As Jaroslav Pelikan has written: "When they put such an emphasis on the role of the senses in worship, the iconophiles were affirming the role of the body in salvation – of the physical body of Christ as the means of

⁴ A. Hastings, *A History of African Christianity 1950–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 265–66.

achieving it and of the physical body of man as a participant in it together with the soul."⁵ The material, physical character of the Christian faith is important also to Africans. Do they not also yearn for worship in which all of their senses are engaged? Yet, as Inus Daneel has pointed out, "Many missions totally ignored the role which ritual, ceremonial and symbols can fulfil. The emphasis was placed wholly on the intellectual aspect; emotion must be suppressed as something belonging to a lower order."⁶ On the other hand, whereas Protestant Christianity is centred round a book, Daneel has noted that the life of the Independent Churches is centred round a set of rites.⁷ Within the "historic" churches also it is not difficult to discern a yearning for ritual and symbol in the expression of the faith. The Roman Catholic writer Jean-Marc Ela has argued persuasively that "the African civilization is a civilization of symbols."⁸ Ela's case is that African Christianity urgently needs to break the chains of Western rationality. He dreams of:

a liturgy which would gather up all the techniques of the Word and all the virtues of silence; it would involve the participation of the body and attain cosmic dimensions. In this way, the liturgy of the Word would authentically recite sacred history. The art of telling the story of God's revelation to humanity would produce a drama lived through once again with meaning for each moment, for each cycle of time⁹

This could easily be a description of Eastern worship! The sanctification of time is a guiding principle in the Orthodox liturgy and the soteriological drama at its heart embraces every worshipper yet has cosmic reach and dimensions. The Orthodox would readily accept Ela's proposition that: "Basic symbols reveal God more concretely than clear and distinct ideas; the atmosphere of celebration arises more from *poesis* than from *ratio*."¹⁰

This can be illustrated by considering two key points in Orthodox worship: the *epitaphion* and the use of icons. The central focus of the

⁵ J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: 2 The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1974), p. 122.

⁶ I. Daneel, *Quest For Belonging* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1987), p. 92

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 92

⁸ J.M. Ela, *My Faith as African* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), p. 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Orthodox year is Easter. When it comes to "Holy Friday", there is a tremendous concentration of thought and devotion on the death of Christ. This is expressed particularly poignantly in the symbolism of the *epitaphion* – a richly embroidered veil, upon which is represented the entombment of Christ. This veil is placed in the nave of the church where it vividly represents the dead Jesus. Every worshipper is called to represent Joseph of Arimathea and to carry Jesus to his tomb. The church is completely dark, lit only by hand-held candles which are issued to the worshippers. The clergy are clad in black and the sung liturgy recounts the condemnation, death and burial of Christ. The veil is then raised on poles as a funeral canopy. The whole congregation follows as it is taken out of the church. The death of Christ is to be proclaimed to the outside world and, indeed, to the whole creation. The congregation processes around the outside of the church building, pausing at each of the four points of the compass for a short act of devotion. As each member of the congregation re-enters the church they pass beneath the *epitaphion* and find that the inside of the church has symbolically become the tomb. All are buried with Christ, tasting the bitterness of death yet finding that this death is laced with expectancy. The *epitaphion* is again placed at the centre of the nave and the experience is confirmed and explained by scripture readings. In conclusion, flowers are distributed and everyone departs from the church carrying a flower, speaking both death and of hope. To take part in the *epitaphion* is an overwhelming experience – symphony, opera, drama, church service all combined to give to the worshippers a sense of being buried with Christ, so that they will be able to know the glorious sense of being risen with Christ when Easter day dawns. Protestant sensibilities may raise the question whether the Orthodox do not reduce Good Friday to mere drama. Perhaps it is well to be aware of that danger. However, we should note that the *epitaphion* is well-grounded in the historicity of Christ, in the scriptures and in the cosmic realities to which it reaches. The objective basis of Easter is continually brought forward. The great strength of the Orthodox liturgy is that it gives to the Easter worship a sense of event. The worshippers are gripped and made participant in Christ's death in such a way that the objective and subjective dimensions of the Easter faith are brought together with maximum force. Is this not the kind of symbolism of which Ela dreams for Africa?

Another distinctive element in Orthodox worship is the use of icons. The central feature of the church is the "iconostasis" – the screen which separates the nave (which accommodates the congregation) from the sanctuary (which contains the altar where the clergy celebrate the eucharist). At the centre of the iconostasis are the icons of Christ and of Mary, surrounded by representations of biblical figures. The rest of the interior of the church, both walls and ceiling, is covered with paintings, in the recognised iconographic style, of prominent figures from scripture and Christian history. The effect is to give a powerful sense of the communion of saints, the unity of the living and the dead in the life of the Church. Timothy Ware has written as follows of the role of the icons in worship:

The icons which fill the church serve as a point of meeting between heaven and earth. As each local congregation prays Sunday by Sunday, surrounded by the figures of Christ, the angels, and the saints, these visible images remind the faithful unceasingly of the invisible presence of the whole company of heaven at the Liturgy. The faithful can feel that the walls of the church open out upon eternity, and they are helped to realize that their Liturgy on earth is one and the same with the great Liturgy of heaven. The multitudinous icons express visibly the sense of 'heaven on earth.'¹¹

The point to be made is not that the African Church should necessarily develop an African iconography parallel to that of Eastern Orthodoxy. It is rather to raise the question whether, as Africans respond to the Gospel of Christ, they may not borrow, adapt and develop symbolism of various kinds which can express important elements in the Christian faith. Such symbolism will require to be grounded in the historicity of Christ, in the Bible and in the tradition of the Church but will also have resonance with important themes in African culture. Might it be time for the historic churches to give more active consideration to what the African culture of symbol demands of their worship?

The Sacramentality of the World

One of the most persistent African criticisms of the Western form of Christianity is that it seems to be restricted to certain narrowly

¹¹ T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), pp. 277–78.

defined parts of personal and communal life, leaving large areas where resources for living must be found elsewhere. African Christians have sought a religion which is material as well as spiritual, communal as well as personal, for the home and the market as well as for the church, for weekdays as well as for Sunday. Here again the life and experience of Eastern Orthodoxy may form a valuable point of reference for African thought. Orthodox worship is sacramental. There is tremendous concentration particularly on the celebration of the eucharist. In virtue of the Incarnation, the Orthodox believe that in the sacraments material things are made the vehicle of the Spirit. This sacramentality of the material is not, however, restricted to the realm of the Liturgy. As Alexander Schmemmann has written, in his book *The World As Sacrament*, "The only true temple of God is man and through him the world. Each ounce of matter belongs to God and is to find in God its fulfilment. Each instant of time is God's time and is to fulfil itself as God's eternity. Nothing is 'neutral'. For the Holy Spirit, as a ray of light, as a smile of joy, has 'touched' all things, all time – revealed all of them as precious stones of a precious temple"¹² This confidence in the material world as being subject to God's redemption in Christ is stated in another work of Schmemmann's with a defiance which may well speak to the cry of the African: "It is *this world* (and not any 'other world'), it is *this life* (and not some 'other life') that were given to man to be a sacrament of the divine presence, given as communion with God, and it is only through this world, this life, by 'transforming' them into communion with God that man *was to be*."¹³ There is no question, in the Orthodox understanding of the Christian life, of turning away from this 'profane' world in order to enter another 'sacred' world. Nothing in our present life and experience is beyond the presence and the potential of the Holy Spirit.

This is vividly illustrated in the services of blessing which are practised by the Orthodox. As Timothy Ware explains:

The Orthodox Church employs a great number of minor blessings, and these, too, are of a sacramental nature: blessings

¹² A. Schmemmann, *The World As Sacrament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966) pp. 92–93.

¹³ A. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), p. 100.

of corn, wine and oil; of fruit, fields and homes; of any object or element. These lesser blessings and services are often very practical and prosaic: there are prayers for blessing a car or a railway station, or for clearing a place of vermin. Between the wider and narrower sense of the term 'sacrament' there is no rigid division: the whole Christian life must be seen as a unity, as a single mystery of one great sacrament, whose different aspects are expressed in a great variety of acts, some performed but once in a man's life, others perhaps daily.¹⁴

The faith of Africans seems to cry out for this kind of sacramentality. Ephraim Ikenga-Metuh, e.g., has pointed out the propensity of African Independent Churches for "creating sacred places like 'The Mercy Land', sacralizing conspicuous spots like hills and streams, display of holy objects like wearing the soutane, holy water, holy oil, etc."¹⁵ Likewise in the historic churches the blessing of articles connected with the worship of the church is vested with a gravity of sacramental depth and import. There is a longing for God's grace to reach and touch our existence in all its materiality and mundaneness and to light it up with the glory of his presence. Is this not the very longing which is answered by the Incarnation of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit? Do not these central convictions of the Christian faith invite expression of the sense of sacramentality which arises naturally within the African spirit?

This embrative character of the Orthodox understanding of Christianity also causes the faith to be incarnated in the life of the whole community. The cycles of fasting and celebration prescribed by the liturgy are not only followed on a personal basis but are built into the life of the community at large. During Lent, e.g., little meat is sold in strongly Orthodox countries and bars and restaurants are sparsely patronised. The sense of desolation which culminates in Good Friday spreads throughout the whole community and everyone therefore shares in the joy of Easter morning. As a matter of history, in the Orthodox countries the whole life of society has been centred around remembrance of the events of the Gospel. Practices such as not eating and putting on new clothes in the morning before going to worship cause piety to become embodied in the ordinary life of the community. African Christians also long to see the Gospel governing

¹⁴ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, p. 283.

¹⁵ E. Ikenga-Metuh, "The Spirituality of African Independent Church Movements", *Religion in Malawi* 3 (1991), p. 8.

the life of society at large. This is illustrated by the "Zion Cities" and "Jeruselems" at the centre of many Independent Church movements where the ritual of the church forms the central reference point for every aspect of communal life.

A final point to note is that the range of the Gospel message, in the Orthodox understanding, reaches beyond human society and the material world. The entire universe is called to hear the Gospel and find its true destiny in the life of the church. This is the significance of the fact that the announcement of Easter is made *outside* the church building. It is believed to be not a matter for the believers only but to be a message for the outside world and, indeed, for the whole cosmos. This cosmic range and depth of the faith may strike a chord also in Africa which has an ear for the Gospel which not only challenges individuals to faith but gives them their place in the renewal of the whole creation. Might the African Church benefit from exploring ways of expressing the sacramentality of the whole of reality in light of the Incarnation, Atonement and Resurrection of Christ?

The Church as Communion

Orthodox ecclesiology is distinguished for its emphasis on the identity and unity of the Church being found at the level of the local congregation. Very influential is the principle that "wherever the eucharist is, there is the Church."¹⁶ As Timothy Ware has written,

The Orthodox theology of the Church is above all else a theology of communion. Each local Church is constituted, as Ignatius saw, by the congregation of the faithful, gathered round their bishop and celebrating the Eucharist; the Church universal is constituted by the communion of the heads of the local Churches, the bishops, with the another. Unity is not maintained from without by the authority of a Supreme Pontiff, but created from within by the celebration of the Eucharist.¹⁷

So great is this emphasis on the local Church being the expression of the Church's catholicity that some theologians have feared it could

¹⁶ See, e.g., J.D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), pp. 23–25, 123–142.

¹⁷ Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 250.

lapse into congregationalism.¹⁸ In Africa the danger lies in the opposite direction. Almost everywhere the pattern of church growth has been based on a mission headquarters which dictated the identity and was the focus of unity for the ever-widening circle of "local" churches. This has meant that the churches have tended to be condemned to an "out-station mentality" which has retarded their growth to maturity and has often been a factor in schism and separation. The dependence on the centre for resources, leadership, guidance, unity and identity can easily give rise to frustration and a desire for greater independence. Might not the local churches of Africa benefit from sharing the Orthodox confidence that "the local church is not part of the church universal but the expression of the church universal."¹⁹

The fact that it is the eucharist which is regarded as the source of the identity and unity of the Church raises acute questions about the rarity of the sacrament of communion in most African "local" churches. These questions require answers if the out-stations are to become churches fully conscious of their integrity and vocation. Further question must also be addressed to the African tendency, which is by no means restricted to the episcopal churches, to develop church life on hierarchical lines. From an Orthodox perspective this is a profound theological error. The Eastern emphasis has been on the conciliar character of the structure of the Church as it came into being in the early centuries. The Western development which led to the Pope becoming the focus of unity and authority in the Church is regarded by the Orthodox as entirely mistaken. They consider that it is in the communion of local churches, as expressed in ecumenical Councils, which is the true locus of unity and authority in the church. The foundation of this belief lies in the doctrine of the Trinity. The Cappadocian teaching that the unity of God is to be understood in terms of a communion of persons carries the corollary that the one church must be understood in terms of the communion of the many local churches. The nature of the triune God demands consideration as Africa evolves the structures of its churches. Are these not too often hierarchical in a way that reflects the structures of this world rather than the nature of the transcendent living God revealed in Christ?

¹⁸ See, e.g., Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, passim.

¹⁹ N. Lossky, "Orthodoxy", N. Lossky et al. ed., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), p. 766.

Might recognition of the integrity of the local church not help African Christianity to develop ecclesiastical structures that are characterized by communion rather than by hierarchy?

Of course, there is a need for unifying structures beyond the local churches but African Christians might well profit from considering the warning of Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas:

If the locality of the Church is not to be absorbed and in fact negated by the element of universality, the utmost care must be taken so that the structures of ministries which are aimed at facilitating communion among the local Churches do not become a superstructure over the local Church.... All structures aimed at facilitating the universality of the Church create a network of communion of Churches, not a new form of Church.²⁰

At the local level the same conviction is expressed in the mutual dependence of the priest and people. Both the existence and the function of the priesthood are found within the community and can exist only there. It is significant that the Orthodox have never tolerated private masses. The mass depends not only on the actions of the priest but also on the presence of the people. Not in conforming to a hierarchical structure but rather in relationships of communion is the life of the Church to be found. In that Eastern insight lies wealth which might be tapped with great advantage by the church in Africa.

Conclusion: The African Church and the Orthodox Tradition

David Clement Scott was profoundly aware of the historic importance of the growth of African Christianity. In 1895 he wrote these words:

In the first centuries of Christianity amid the fire of fierce persecution the creed of the Christian Church was formulated by the acute Greek intellect trained for that purpose by centuries of philosophical speculation. Imperial Rome lent to the Gospel the type of law and organised order. The Teutonic and Anglo-Saxon races received it and gave it their aggressive spirit of self-propagation. Now the Church has come to the

²⁰ Zizioulas, *Being As Communion*, p. 259.

African, and his contribution to Christian life and thought is still to be given. What will it be?²¹

Scott did not pretend to have the answer. He was sure, however, that an indispensable point of reference for the evolving African Christianity would be "the life and worship and doctrine of primitive Christianity – of the centuries before error and schism rent the seamless robe of Christ."²² It may well be that one of the things that drew his attention to Eastern Christianity was that, as Lossky has written, "the Orthodox preserved the very strong sense of an unbroken continuity with the faith of the apostles as interpreted and witnessed to by the seven great ecumenical councils and the fathers of the church."²³ Orthodoxy has been distinguished by the attempt to keep alive and be guided by the ancient tradition of the Church. As Timothy Ware explains, "An Orthodox must not simply know and quote the Fathers, he must enter into the spirit of the fathers and acquire a 'Patristic mind'. He must treat the fathers not merely as relics from the past, but as living witnesses and contemporaries."²⁴ There may lie an important part of the value of Eastern Orthodoxy to today's African Church – it is well equipped to be a means of being linked with the life of the ancient church. The identity and vocation of the African Church need not be worked out exclusively by reference to the Western tradition of the modern missionary movement. The Eastern tradition forms another valuable point of reference. It will give African Christians the opportunity to reflect on themes as urgently relevant as the culture of symbol, the sacramentality of the world, and the church as communion. Furthermore it will link the African Church to the patristic tradition that is an invaluable resource in the development of its identity and mission. Opportunities abound for cross-fertilization between African Christianity and the theology and experience of the Eastern Orthodox. The Byzantine turrets and domes of St. Michael and All Angels call for such an exercise. It may still have much to contribute to the continuing growth of the Church of which Scott dreamed – both thoroughly African and thoroughly Catholic.

²¹ *Life and Work in British Central Africa*, April 1895.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Lossky, "Orthodoxy", p. 765.

²⁴ Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 212.

8. Reflections on a Theology of Recreation in the African Context

Work, Play and the African Worldview

Both in Christian theology and in modern thinking generally recreation is something of a cinderella subject. In the Christian tradition there is a strong element of ascetic suspicion of personal and social recreation. Sport and music, dancing and drama are often presented as representing the "world" from which the Christian is called to escape. The moral earnestness of evangelical faith has put a premium on religious duty and purposeful activity. In so far as recreation and relaxation are given a place it is merely as a pause in order to "recharge the batteries" for the next round of activity. There is little trace of any strong sense that recreation might be an end in itself or a proper expression of Christian faith. Rather, the images of the Christian life which predominate are those of discipleship, of battle and of service. Rest and play do not figure significantly in the conventional image of the Christian life and are generally regarded as inconsequential or frivolous. All this can be borne out by a study of Christian biography where conversion is often described in terms of abandonment of the delights of this world in favour of an intense religious commitment which precludes most of the normal forms of social recreation.

This tendency in the Christian tradition to down-value, if not to despise, play and recreation has been powerfully bolstered by the emergence in modern Western industrial society of the cycle of production and consumption as the central dynamic in human life. In modern times western society has become work-centred and achievement-oriented to such an extent that people are defined and valued not in terms of who they *are* but rather in terms of what they *do*. The measure of an individual is his or her capacity to produce and to consume. Our self-esteem and identity are derived from what we are able to produce by our labour power and from what we can afford to have and to consume. The real business of life, therefore, is work. There may be recreational activities but they are of consequence only as a means of refreshment in order to continue with renewed vigour the round of production and consumption. The terms used for non-

working time, such as "vacation" or "leave", reveal very clearly that it is the world of work that is the world that really matters in the modern West. Even where recreation apparently flourishes, for example, in the world of entertainment or the world of sport, it rarely does so as sheer play but rather has been infiltrated by the values of achievement-centred modern life. So leisure too has become big business and people take part in it not with joyous and exuberant abandon but with the almost solemn intensity of purpose which indicates that they are paying homage even in leisure to the sacred cycle of production and consumption which sustains modern life. It is your place and your status within that cycle which determines who you are and what you are worth – so all possible energy must be concentrated on the world of work. Recreation is marginalised and set aside as irrelevant.

Taken together the Christian tradition and the modern Western value-system operate powerfully to exalt the value of work and down-grade rest, play, fun and games. Traditional African society had never known this kind of rigid division of life into (valuable) work and (frivolous) recreation so when it appeared in the attitudes and the teaching of the modern missionary movement it was as something new and challenging. Moreover the value of work and the great importance of the cycle of production and consumption was something actively promoted by the missionaries. James Stewart of Lovedale Mission argued that, "The gospel of work does not save souls, but it saves people.... Lazy races die or decay. Races that work prosper on earth. The British race, in all its greatest branches, is noted for its restless activity. Its life motto is work! work!"¹ Even a strongly "pro-African" missionary like John Philip could write that one of the tasks of the missionary was to "teach [Africans] industrious habits, and create a demand for British manufactures."² The Lovedale newspaper *The Christian Express*, in an editorial in 1878, was quite explicit in outlining the social goal of the Christian missions:

We want to see the natives become workers. As they become

¹ J. Wells, *Stewart of Lovedale*, (London: 1908) p 216; cit. Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid*, (Maryknoll New York: Orbis & Cape Town: David Philip, 1988), pp. 43–44.

² J. Philip, *Researches in South Africa*, (London: Duncan Books, 1878), Vol I pp. ix–x; cit. Villa-Vicencio, *op cit*, p. 44.

Christianised they will want more clothing, better houses, furniture, books, education for the children, and a hundred other things which they do not have now and never have had. And all these things they can get by working, and only by working. But Christianity also teaches the duty of working, and denounces idleness as a sin. So to Christianise a Kaffir [sic] is the shortest way, and the surest, to make him put his hand steadily and willingly to the work that is waiting to be done.³

It seems that a key part of the missionary programme was to introduce to Africa the work-ethic which the missionaries regarded as the mainspring of European prosperity and civilization. Reflecting critically on this heritage Eboussi Boulaga writes, "Christianity has made of professional conscientiousness, of duty well done, a moral obligation, a vocation – that is, a way of religious perfection and salvation. Elsewhere, in Africa especially, the ideal is leisure and ease."⁴

While this "gospel of work" has enjoyed a fair measure of success in Africa it has not succeeded in eradicating a strong sense of the value of rest and play, exuberance and celebration. The missionaries were at a loss to understand, for example, the amount of energy which Africans were prepared to put into dancing and, generally, they discouraged it. Yet dancing remains today a central expression of African life and identity and increasingly is being integrated into Christian worship. Here, as at many other points, it has become apparent to thoughtful Christian Africans that here is a discrepancy between the Western understanding of the faith inculcated by the missionaries and what is found in the Bible. Dancing was outlawed, yet it features in the Old Testament as a means of expressing celebration and worship. So Africa finds a resonance in scripture for a set of values which was generally discounted by Western missionaries. African Christian worship, even within the restrictions of a basically Western pattern, is characterised by an exuberant sense of celebration that strikes observers as quite distinctive and indeed, as quite astonishing in the context of much hardship and suffering. In fact, the occasions which seem to matter most to Africans are non-productive in character. In Africa identity and worth are expressed to a far greater extent in worship and social recreation than in the world of work. Celebration,

³ *The Christian Express*, Vol VIII (95), 1 August 1878, pp. 1–2; cit Villa-Vicencio, *op cit*, pp. 44–45.

⁴ F.E. Boulaga, *Christianity Without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity*, (Maryknoll New York: Orbis, 1984), p. 39.

dance, and perhaps even play have emerged as matters of importance in African worship and spirituality and on the principle of *lex orandi lex credendi*, it seems that the time is ripe for some theological reflection on these issues.

This is connected, of course, to the oft-voiced criticism that the Western expression of Christianity does not offer "enough religion" to satisfy the African soul. As Inus Daneel writes:

In traditional African life, religion is inseparable from the rest of daily life and behaviour. Religion, cultural life, social life, national life, the economy are all interwoven. They are at most colours of the same spectrum. By contrast Christianity – so, at least, it appeared – was something different. Religion could be practised in isolation from other aspects of life.... There were few attempts to show people that one's daily work is also a form of worship. In fact, about the whole area of a man's physical needs, daily struggle for existence and human requirements the missionary was strangely silent. He could proclaim a gospel of the *soul's* salvation, but not of the entire *man*.⁵

This conception, Daneel suggests, has never been fully accepted in Africa and there is a "yearning for a religion which would embrace all of life and would fill the whole day."⁶ The fact that Africans have found the Western brand of Christianity to be wanting at this point raises far-reaching theological questions. Is it, in fact, theologically correct to conceive of the Christian life in terms of narrowly conceived religious activities and the observation of certain taboos? Is the African instinct not quite sound when it looks to the Gospel for a much broader renewal of human life? Does God's purpose that humanity should reflect the divine image and have dominion over all the earth not call for an expression of faith that extends to every dimension of human experience? Daneel mentions daily work and physical needs. Others have considered illness and healing, communal life, solidarity with the ancestors, problems of witchcraft. Here we are concerned to give some theological attention to the whole of the lighter side of life which we may generally classify as recreation. Attempts to do this in a systematic manner have been rare but particular reference will be made to Jürgen Moltmann's small book *Theo-*

⁵ M.L. Daneel, *Quest For Belonging*, (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1987), pp. 79,78; Daneel's italics.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 79.

*logy and Joy*⁷ in which he seeks to reflect on the place of play in Christian faith and life. In seeking to construct the outlines of a theology of recreation we will consider creation, redemption, and the final consummation.

Creation

Fundamental to the biblical understanding of the creation of the universe is that it is creation *ex nihilo* and that it is a free, gracious act of God. There is no necessity about the creation. The world is not a physical emanation of God. Nor is it in any way co-eternal with God or necessary to his being. Rather, he has freely and spontaneously brought a world into existence out of non-existence. He has given this world an integrity of its own and has planted in it rational creaturely beings upon whom he may bestow his bounty and with whom he may share fellowship. The created realities have no likeness in being to their Creator but are external to him and depend for their existence on his grace and will. As the early Fathers used to express it, he was not always the creator but has now become the Creator through the free and gracious act by which he has brought the world into being. This was one of the points at which the Fathers had to break through the inherited Greek conceptuality where God was always and only thought of as existing in a necessary eternal conjunction with all things. It was an astonishing discovery to learn from the Bible that, as Athanasius put it, "the Word himself *became* the Maker of the things that have a beginning."⁸ This makes plain to us the remarkable freedom of God. He is free to do something new. He is free to become something which he was not before – a characteristic of God which was fully revealed when the Creator became incarnate as a creature within his creation.

It was as the Fathers increasingly came to terms with the incarnation in all its dimensions that their understanding of the creation was much illumined. They were led to see that the creation and continued existence of the world were derived from and grounded in the limitless love of God, the love which God eternally is as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and which he wishes to share with his creation. Viewed in this

⁷ J. Moltmann, *Theology and Joy*, (London: SCM, 1973).

⁸ Athanasius, *Con Ar*, 2.57

light creation, like redemption, was an act of God's sheer grace. It did not come into existence through any inner compulsion in God's being. Nor did it come into being just by itself or accidentally as the product of irrational chance. The position which the Fathers reached was that the universe flowed freely from and continues to be grounded in the eternal love God. Although in his complete self-sufficiency God has no need of the universe, he nevertheless freely created it out of his love and grace, so that the universe must be regarded as having an ultimate rational ground in the beneficent nature and love of God.

If the creation is not necessary and is created by God simply for the joy which it would bring, then it raises the question whether the categories of games and of play may not be highly appropriate images for considering God's creation. Jürgen Moltmann suggests that the fundamental character of the creation is that it is "meaningful but not necessary" and that this is best reflected in human play:

Like the creation, man's games are an expression of freedom and caprice, for playing relates to the joy of the creator with his creation and the pleasure of the player with his game. Like creation games combine sincerity and mirth, suspense and relaxation. The player is wholly absorbed in his game and takes it seriously, yet at the same time he transcends himself and his game, for it is after all only a game.⁹

Moltmann finds a biblical basis for this correlation in Proverbs 8.30 where the wisdom of God says, "I was the craftsman at his side. I was filled with delight day after day rejoicing (Moltmann suggests *playing*) always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind."¹⁰ Here is one theological basis for considering the place of recreation in the Christian life. If it is in play and in games that we most nearly reflect the activity of God as Creator, then such activity occupies an important part in our reflection of the image of God and in the restoration of the image of God in our lives. If God created the world in joyous freedom, then the abandon and exuberance of our games give an important opportunity for us to realise and express our identity as the children of God who are marked by the family likeness.

⁹ Moltmann, *op cit*, p. 41.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 40.

Redemption

A key point in the Christian understanding of salvation is that our redemption is brought about by God's grace and God's initiative, not through our own works or our own achievement. This is the clear teaching of the New Testament but is so uncongenial to human pride that there has been a constant tendency to subvert it. The legalism against which the apostle Paul contended has risen again in every generation to threaten the evangelical character of Christianity. In Africa today it is probably the most common misunderstanding of the faith that it consists primarily in the fulfilment of certain rituals and obligations. There is again a need for a recovery of the true character of Christian obedience, that "good works" are not the means to acceptance by God but rather the free and joyful response to God's loving acceptance which reaches us in the Gospel.

It may therefore be of some importance to observe that a certain sense of play and celebration is integral to the proper character of Christian obedience. This comes out in Luther's seminal tract on the subject *The Freedom of a Christian Man* which Jürgen Moltmann expounds as follows:

Free works then are works freed from the purpose and necessity to justify oneself. Like grace itself they too occur 'for nothing', that is, for the sake of pleasing God and out of love for the neighbour. Freed from self-assertion and self-searching, free works are done spontaneously, unselfishly, as if playing.¹¹

Christian life and obedience are characterised by a sense of play, a sense of relaxation. Luther's picture of his life as a Reformer is a telling one:

I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Phillip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it!¹²

Confidence in the Gospel brought to Luther that sense of relaxation,

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹² M. Luther, *The Wittenberg Sermons*, 1522; cit. E.G. Rupp & B. Drewery, *Martin Luther*, (London: Edward Arnold 1970) p. 102.

that *joie de vivre*, which enabled him, amidst all his labours, to have a large place for rest and recreation in his life.

Moltmann attempts to bring Luther's critical distinction to bear on modern life:

The exploiting *society of achievement* is a form of institutionalized justification by works. Its objective compulsion to worship the idols of its own achievements is nothing but organized blasphemy. Justification by works as practised by the mediaeval ecclesiastical society was child's play in comparison.¹³

There is a need to recover the primacy of *being* over *doing*. Once it is established who we are there will be no difficulty in living the life of obedience. Moltmann, following Luther, refers to the biblical image: "A good tree brings forth good fruit. The tree does not have to be forced to do this. It does it all by itself to display its riches and out of sheer joy of existence."¹⁴

Too often the Christian life appears very different: forced, laborious, almost reluctant. Is it because of an inherent perverse refusal to acknowledge the free, gratuitous character of redemption and to respond accordingly? The reluctance in much Christianity to "let go" in celebration and play may reflect a basic refusal to come to terms with the free grace of God in the Gospel. Social recreation, games, play and celebration may form an important part of an authentic response to the Gospel. It is noteworthy that the Lord's Supper, the ultimate symbol of the Gospel and of our response to it, is not a programme, not a matter of work to be done or something to be achieved. Rather it is an occasion when people sit down together for a meal. For all that it is a time to remember Christ's suffering and the cost of our salvation, there is also a note of joy and of celebration to be struck. It is bread and wine, not bread and water, which are shared. If that reflects the true character of our response to the Gospel then the times of celebration, of relaxation, of recreation in our lives may be shot through with evangelical significance.

¹³ Moltmann, *op cit*, p. 69.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 68.

The Final Consummation

Probably it is thinking about the final consummation that Christians have been most free in employing the categories of dance and play, song and celebration. Moltmann comments:

Christian eschatology has never thought of the end of history as a kind of retirement or pay day or accomplished purpose, but has regarded it totally without purpose as a hymn of praise for unending joy, as an ever-varying round dance of the redeemed in the trinitarian fullness of God, and as the complete harmony of soul and body.... It has painted it in colours which for all of us in Ernst Bloch's beautiful phrase – 'shine back into our childhood,' namely the colours of unhindered laughter, devoted vision of the marvellous riches and goodness of God and of new innocence. Christian eschatology has painted the end of history in the colours of aesthetic categories.¹⁵

The Psalmist describes his destiny in these terms: "Thou dost show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fullness of joy, in thy right hand are pleasures for ever more"¹⁶ In the third century, when Saturnus and Perpetua were about to be martyred, the command of the elders given to them in the vision of Saturus was, "Go and play."¹⁷ Luther exultantly anticipated the life to come as a time when people will "play with heaven and earth, sun and all the creatures.... All creatures shall have their fun, love and joy, and shall laugh with thee and thou with them, even according to the body."¹⁸

To those who are familiar with the works of C.S. Lewis, that last sentence of Luther is inescapably evocative of some of the passages in the chronicles of Narnia when, after victory is won, Aslan gambols with the children in joyous abandon.¹⁹ Interestingly, Lewis was once taxed by the question of whether it was legitimate to use the images of play and of dance to speak of the highest things. Was there not some irreverence in using images of frivolity to speak of the divine salvation and consummation of the ages? Lewis's reply was that it is

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 55.

¹⁶ Psalm 16:11.

¹⁷ *Martyrdom of Perpetua* 12; cit W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1984), p. 417.

¹⁸ M. Luther WA XXXVI p. 600, XLV p. 356; cit. Moltmann, *op cit*, p. 57

¹⁹ See C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, (London: Fontana Lions, 1980, 1st pub 1950) pp. 148–151.

only in activities which are frivolous here and now that we can catch a glimpse of the glorious spontaneity and freedom which will characterize the life to come:

It is only in our 'hours-off', only in our moments of permitted festivity, that we find analogy. Dance and game are frivolous, unimportant down here; is not their natural place. Here they are a moment's rest from the life we placed here to live. But in this world everything is upside down. That which, if it could be prolonged here, would be truancy, is likeliest that which in a better country is the End of ends. Joy is the serious business of heaven.²⁰

This great reversal, which Lewis has so graphically portrayed throughout his work, may lie in the future but there must also be some anticipation of it in the life which we lead now. The Christian life, even here and now on earth, is a progressive anticipation of the kingdom of God which is its proper destiny. These 'hours off' therefore come to have eschatological significance as they mark the way in which the proper balance and proportion is being restored to our lives as we are prepared for the final destiny. Those "frivolous" games and songs and dances may in fact be the ground on which we anticipate the final goal and destiny of our lives. In the Old Testament the great archetype of the Christian life, the journey from Egypt to the promised land, was a journey from work to rest, from deprivation and oppression to the lavish provision of the land flowing with milk and honey. The physical land of Canaan was not the final place of arrival for the people of God but the rest and the joy which they found there acted as a foretaste and anticipation of the glories and the joys of the final destination. In Christ we live "between the times", in the tension of having arrived and having yet to arrive. Yet it is a tension in which in growing measure we may enjoy and experience the fruits of the final inheritance. Does this not give to the lighter side of life a pronounced eschatological significance?

Re-creation and Recreation

It may be objected that much of the above theological reflection is based on inference and that the supposed importance of recreation in

²⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*, (London: Fontana, 1966), pp. 94-95.

the Christian life is lacking a biblical basis. It is certainly true that themes such as games, play, drama and dance do not receive any substantial or sustained attention in the New Testament. However, it has to be remembered that there is a concentration in the Bible on *Heilsgeschichte* which means that many important areas of human experience e.g. domestic life, political life, academic life, are touched on only in passing and it is by a process of inference that biblical truth has been brought to bear upon them. At the same time, there are explicit points which demand attention. Particularly of note is the contrast in style between the lifestyle of Jesus and his disciples and that of other contemporary religious groups. In fact, the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"²¹ Clearly Jesus promoted a much less abstemious form of discipleship than was expected at the time. Indeed the air of festivity which characterised the life of Jesus was made a matter of reproach. Jesus once remarked:

To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the market-places and calling out to others: 'we played the flute for you and you did not dance; we sang a dirge and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'²²

As Jesus in his life blazed a trail for restoration of true humanity it is clear that he followed a lifestyle which at least left him open to the accusation of indulging too much in the good things of life. Turning to the epistles we find that Paul's missionary work apparently left little opportunity for leisure but there are sporting images in his writing which indicate at least some familiarity with leisure activities and he readily acknowledged that "physical training is of some value."²³

In making the case for a more positive attitude to recreation it is necessary to take account of the main grounds of Christian suspicion of recreational activities, namely that these are escapist and idolatrous. These are valid concerns. With regard to escapism, many people do embrace a hedonistic lifestyle out of despair over the condition and the prospects of humanity at large. Christians, however,

²¹ Matthew 9:14.

²² Matthew 11:16–19.

²³ See II Timothy 2:5, 4:6; I Timothy 4:8.

cannot be escapist since they have the mandate, following Jesus, to love and transform this world. Called to take up the cross the Christian identifies with the world in all its suffering and anguish – but always in the hope of the resurrection. That is why recreation and celebration are of evangelical importance even in situations of human misery and squalour: they are the expression of irrepressible hope, the anticipation of what will be, the affirmation that the present anguish does not have the last word. Far from being escapist, recreation, viewed in this light, may be a key element in engaging in hope with the suffering and oppression of contemporary human life. With regard to idolatry, it is quite obvious that it is possible to indulge in recreation in an idolatrous spirit – becoming so intoxicated with the activity itself that it comes to occupy the place of ultimacy which truly belongs to God alone. However, it is happily possible to enjoy the good things of life in a quite different spirit. No theologian was more aware of the danger of idolatry than John Calvin but he was also emphatic that the gifts of God are given to us not only to meet our bodily necessities but also for our active enjoyment.²⁴ The key point for Calvin is that in all our use and enjoyment of this present world we are to have an attitude of faith: "The use of earthly blessings is connected with pure feelings of faith, in the exercise of which we can alone enjoy them rightly and lawfully to our own welfare"²⁵ In this attitude of faith and thanksgiving we may enjoy to the full the pleasures of the present life without succumbing to the ever-present threat of idolatry. The abuse of recreation may be an important concern but it should not be allowed to scare us away from giving recreation a proper place in our living out of the Christian life.

God's purpose in human life is described in the New Testament as recreation, the making of a new humanity. The argument of this paper is that in our moments of recreation we may discover and express our humanity in ways which reflect God's new creation. It is in the free play of recreation that we can most accurately reflect the freedom with which God created the world. It is with a sense of celebration and play that we can live out the obedience which is consonant with the free, gratuitous character of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is in dance and in game that we discover something of the life which will be ours

²⁴ J. Calvin, *Institutes*, III x 2.

²⁵ J. Calvin, Commentary on Psalm 36.9; cit. R.S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, (Tyler: Geneva Divinity School Press, 1982), p. 135.

in the eternal kingdom of God. In short, there is a distinct evangelical and eschatological character to recreation which demands that it be given much more positive emphasis. It is of value to the Christian not only as a means of "recharging" in preparation for more work but also as, in itself, a necessary and important means of expressing Christian faith, obedience and identity. Far from representing "time off" from Christian life and obedience it is essential to their proper balance and true expression. Writing of the wholeness of human life and experience Eboussi Boulaga comments,

It has no need of being sacralised from without. It has no need of religion, and must be lived in a faith according to which the term of the representation is the human being as such. This end is not only to come in the resorption of all contradictions. The living of imperfect existence without hesitation or reticence, without second thoughts, seeking a sober happiness therein, welcoming the astounding brilliance of its joy and beauty... this, too, is wisdom.²⁶

In so far as God's purpose in salvation may truly be understood as re-creation and re-constitution of authentic humanity, a restoration of the image of God in human life, then recreation must form an important part of our Christian life and obedience. Within African Christianity there is an instinctive, albeit often suppressed, awareness of the importance of this dimension of life. It may be that this implicit critique reveals a deficiency in the Christian tradition. As Boulaga bluntly writes, "Christians have not been educated to the joy of living, but have contented themselves with 'training', with killing the 'beast' in themselves. This has surely been necessary, but it is by no means sufficient."²⁷ The purpose of this study has not been to despise or discount the elements of renunciation, self-denial, training and discipline which are essential to a healthy Christian life. But it has sought to ask whether a sense of the value and evangelical significance of that lighter side of life which we classify as recreation is not also necessary to a proper and authentic response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

²⁶ Boulaga, *op cit*, pp. 181-182.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 202.



Kenneth R. Ross was Professor of Theology at Chancellor College, University of Malawi, where he taught from 1988 to 1998. He is now the parish minister of Netherlorn in Argyll, Hon Fellow of the University of Edinburgh School of Divinity, Series Editor of the Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity and Chair of the Scotland Malawi Partnership.

The essays presented in this book are a plea for relevancy and contextuality in Christian praxis and theological reflection in Malawi and, indeed, in Africa as a whole. There is a profound concern for the translation of the Gospel of Christ... in such a manner that it empowers the people to transform their society by living out the message of the Kingdom of God. The case of Malawi clearly shows that the Church in Africa may be the only sign of hope in the midst of all the suffering, extreme violations of human rights, and genocides. I therefore heartily commend the book to every person interested in the role of the church in society and its potential for contributing towards social, political and economic change in Africa.

Dr Ambrose Moyo, University of Zimbabwe

Cover picture shows the dance and drama youth group at the World Council of Churches World Mission Conference, Arusha, Tanzania, March 2018. Photo taken by Albin Hillert and reproduced by kind permission of the WCC.



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